

BEADLE'S Dime New York Library

COPYRIGHTED IN 1879, BY BEADLE & ADAMS.

Vol. I.

Published Every
Two Weeks.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$2.50 a Year.

No. 4

The Kidnapper; ^{Or, the Great} Shanghai of the Northwest.

By Philip S. Warne, Author of "Tiger Dick," "A Hard Crowd," etc.



BEARING BLANCHE AWAY.

The Kidnapper;

OR,

The Great Shanghai of the Northwest

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

CHAPTER I.

A CLOUDED LIFE.

ON the Minnesota border!

Rock!—above, around, below—with here and there a gleaming point of crystal, like a star set in a dun firmament. Here a tapering pendant, with its corresponding cone beneath; yonder a column whose slender shaft was fashioned by no human hand; further on an arch, like the vault of some rude fane of eld.

In the center of the apartment appear the remains of a recent fire, and, scattered around, a scanty stock of cooking utensils, such as are used by men who bestow little thought on the elegance of a repast, provided it gives strength to their bodies. The walls are adorned with appurtenances of the chase, hanging from jagged projections or resting on ledges, and skins were stretched upon the rocky floor to serve as couches.

The sole occupant of this weird abode is a young man of perhaps five-and-twenty. In dress he is not unlike others of his class, his stout jerkin and leggings, his belt with its array of pistols, knife and hatchet, and the never-failing rifle that leans against the wall within reach, clearly indicating his calling. In feature, however, he is seen to be intellectual far beyond the common hunter.

He is pacing the apartment with bowed head, a frown of pain knitting his brow, and his firm lips shaken by emotion.

"It is folly to think of these things," he murmurs; "and yet the panorama of my clouded life crowds upon me so to-day."

"How my soul yearns over its irreparable loss in that no recollection of a mother's smile hovers about it, luring it to higher and better things. Alas! I never felt that sacred touch upon my brow. Those lips—like to no other lips—never pressed a mother's kiss upon mine. No kindly eye brightened in sympathy with my joy; no ready ear bent to catch my childish sorrow; no loving bosom waited to receive my aching head."

"The cold tolerance of her who played this part toward me taught me, by contrast with the love I saw lavished upon my more fortunate companions, how much I had lost in being deprived of this holiest, best gift of God to man."

"But most crushing of all was the knowledge that those to whom I should have looked for examples of virtue and uprightness were utterly unworthy of the sacred office they held. How could I honor a man, every sentiment of whose coarse nature did violence to my sense of right—how obey one who held in contempt all law, human and divine? An unbeliever in God and man—a scoffer of virtue and right—an outlaw—my father!"

"Yet he was not satisfied with this. He must endeavor to instill into my mind those pernicious notions by which those like him seek to excuse, if not justify, their evil deeds. He must try to draw me into the terrible vortex, to live an outcast, preying upon society, and repaying its kicks with hatred and injuries. And ably was he seconded by the woman, worthy partner of such a man."

"But I tore myself away from the home I learned to loathe, resolved to shake off the trammels of shame and guilt and wretchedness, and mark out for myself a higher and better life."

"My heart, reaching out blindly for truth, while surrounded by only the worst phases of our imperfect nature, gave to its ideal of human excellence and virtue an exalted place—too high, perhaps; for, while every instinct of my nature led me to seek companionship, how few could I find to equal my standard!"

"It was thus, then, that I met thee, sweet Blanche! Ah! how well the name befitted thy white soul! In thee were every virtue, every grace. In thee I beheld mother, sister—nay, all that my heart had hungered for in those years of loneliness and misery."

"But no, it could not be. They told me that fond parents had linked thy fate with that of another; that hand in hand you had traversed the sunny paths of childhood and youth, blooming into perfectness for one another. Oh! how I envied him his lot—to share with thee the happy years of this world, the eternity of the next!"

"At first I was stunned, paralyzed. I felt no pain. I only knew that my heart was crushed. But that passed, to be succeeded by a storm of agony that swept my soul."

"My heart cried out against this cruel demand, and would not give up its one cherished prize, its only hope. But I thought of the rightful heir of this heritage. Should the hand of the interloper despoil him of his pearl of price? Where were those high principles of honor which I had required of my fellow-men? I, who a

hundred times had told myself that all, all should be cheerfully given up at the behest of duty. I was rebelling, when called upon to make a single sacrifice. Ah! but it was the sum of all in one!"

Suddenly he stopped in his hurried walk and clasped his hands in air above his upturned face, while great beads of sweat stood on his brow and hot tears blinded his eyes.

"Oh! Blanche! Blanche!" he cried, "little do you know the anguish of this crushed and bleeding heart! And yet I would suffer it all, all—nay, a hundredfold intensified, for that one glimpse of heaven before this utter, rayless night!"

His white face dropped into his hands, and for a time his frame quivered beneath the lash of suffering. Then dashing aside his tears, he said:

"I am a child to give way thus. I thought that I was strong, and here I find myself giving free scope to my emotions. But a strange mood has come over me to-day and betrayed me into this weakness. It seems as if some momentous event was impending. I can't understand it. I'll rid myself of it."

Going to a place in the cave where a little stream trickled from the rocks and fell in a basin, he plunged his head into the water several times, removing in a measure the evidences of his recent excitement.

He was here interrupted by the scarcely audible sound of a footfall in one of the passages. Looking up, his eye met the form of a man who was chiefly remarkable on account of his shortness of stature, and the odd appearance presented by a pair of bowed legs. In build he was stout, with deep chest, broad shoulders and long, sinewy arms. His face, deeply bronzed by exposure, where it was not covered by a shaggy beard, bleached to a sandy yellow about the mouth, wore an expression of frankness and honesty. A man of india-rubber and steel, he was a valuable friend, but a formidable foe. Upon discovering him, Walter Weston greeted him with some surprise.

"Eh, Bantam! Back again?"

"Ay, boy. I've found work for you that'll be to your mind, I'm thinkin'. But where's Shang?"

"Gone to restock our larder. We're getting short, you know."

"Hum! I rather counted on Shang. If it wouldn't take time to look him up that we hain't got to spare—"

"Nonsense, Bantam!" interrupted Walter, all eagerness for an adventure. "You're a small army in yourself; and I'll do for the reserve, won't I? Come! lead on—lead on!"

"Not so loud, ye young rattle-pate!" cautioned Bantam, reprovingly, yet good humoredly; for he regarded Walter with much of that chivalric love which man usually accords to woman, but which not infrequently springs up in the breasts of rude men like him for other men of higher culture and refinement.

"Oh! I'm as mum as a last-year's bird's nest," was the laughing rejoinder, an unusual flow of spirits coming as a reaction from the emotion of a few minutes before.

When they had emerged from the cave and stood looking at a footprint which Bantam pointed out, a mist gathered in Walter's eyes, and for a moment his lip trembled, as his thoughts reverted to her who was ever present to his mind.

"It is the footprint of a delicately nurtured woman, Bantam," he said. "The impression is too deep to have been made by a child, yet it shows the foot to have been exceedingly small and shapely."

"Ay, boy; one as ain't used to trampin' in the bush. The trail looks as if she war eanimost tuckered out, poor thing. The tracks has dew in 'em, which shows that they was made last night. Them Injin tracks was made this mornin'. I reckon she escaped from them, an' they're follerin' arter her ag'in. If they ketch her, an' o' course she can't git fur, they may put her out o' the way o' cuttin' stick ag'in."

"Let us hasten to her aid," said Walter, nervously. "We may be in time to save her from the Sioux."

"Hark!" cried Bantam, as the report of a rifle broke on the air.

"What can it mean?" queried Walter. "There it goes again! For heaven's sake, come on!"

"Jest keep yer shirt on, my cantankerous friend!" cautioned Bantam. "We can't run a foot-race to whar the gal is, an' that's sartain."

While he was speaking a chorus of yells burst on the air, followed by a rifle-shot and a woman's shriek of mortal terror.

"My God, they've shot her!" cried Walter, and with a wild foreboding in his heart he dashed along the trail at headlong speed.

With something like an oath, the scout bounded after him, and clutched him by the collar of his jerkin.

"Tarnation!" he cried, "whar's your wits? One would think you was a hul regiment o' reg'lars, an' bullet-proof at that, by the way you—"

"Let me go, Bantam! (It may be she!) The Sioux have been raiding the border lately! Oh, God! if it should be Blanche!) Let me go, I say. I must go to her defense whoever it is."

"Not in that harum-scarum fashion, I reckon. We've got to make tracks. Don't you hear? they're comin' this way. That shot was much nearer than the other ones."

Walter yielded, seeing the good sense of the other's words. Leaving the trail at right angles, they had proceeded scarcely a dozen rods when the scout crouched down, dragging his companion after him.

CHAPTER II.

A N A M B U S H.

A COUNTRY road in Western Minnesota. Blanche Burbank, our heroine, attended on horseback by Burly Ben, a typical borderman. The lady rides a noble animal, sleek of side and lithe of limb, which, because of its speed and beauty, she has christened Selim.

In stature she is not above the medium height; yet there is something in her erect carriage and the steady light of her gray eye which, in a moment of danger, would make her looked up to by most women. Just now her eyes are dimmed by a slight shadow, like the reflection of a cloud in a calm, pellucid pool, while her companion says:

"We must hie us home at a round pace, Miss Blanche; for I'll warrant Master Hal is impatiently waiting for us at home, even now. A brave lad and a true is Master Hal," pursues Burly Ben.

He has been attached to the young man from his very birth, and is never tired of sounding his praises, little dreaming that they may possibly prove less entertaining to another. But on this occasion he is talking to Hal's betrothed, and she is of course supposed to listen eagerly to anything said in her lover's favor; so he continues:

"Ay, a brave lad and a true. Not takin' so much to the woods, mayhap, as I should like; but for all that as gallant a lad as ye'd meet 'twixt daylight and dark. When he was a wee bit of a thing, I promised his father, the major, as I'd stan' by him while wood growed and water run; an' I've done it, I have, an' always will."

"You have ever shown a great love for Major Bearsley, Ben," remarked Blanche; and a close observer might have surmised that it was with a view of changing the subject of the other's discourse.

"Hain't I, though?" replied Ben, enthusiastically. "Ah, Miss Blanche! it was a sore day when the major went on that trip over the mountains. Hal was a wee bit of a chick 'an' ye hadn't seen the light o' day. We had just got our harvest an' was expectin' him home every day, when one o' the Sioux that he took with him—they was friendly in them days—come an' told us how their party had been attacked, an' the major an' Tom Tracy an' a lot o' the Sioux was tomahawked an' scalped."

"We was a sad lot after such news. Tom Tracy was a poor stick, an' there was little grievin' on his account; but everybody as knowed the major felt as if they'd lost their best friend."

While conversing, they had penetrated a point where the road was bordered on either hand by a dense growth of timber, the trees interlacing their branches overhead and enveloping the way in twilight, when Blanche suddenly reined her horse aside, exclaiming with startled eyes:

"Ben, what is that? Did you see nothing?"

"Eh! What? Where?"

"There, at the side of the road. I thought I saw something glide behind yonder bush. But of course I was mistaken."

"It's not like you, Miss Blanche, to be scared at—"

Before he could conclude the sentence, the crack of half a dozen rifles rung out on the air, drowned by a burst of demoniac yells. The next instant the road was filled with dark forms, hideous with paint, and all the wild paraphernalia of the savage on the war-path, each bush and coppice seeming to yield its warrior.

"An ambush!" ejaculated Ben, as his horse uttered a cry of pain and swerved to one side, affrighted by the dark objects that sprung into view, as if out of the very ground.

"Are you hurt, Ben?" asked Blanche.

"No. Keep straight for home. Look out for a leap!"

And with a quick motion he flashed his whip across Selim's eyes, and almost simultaneously dealt him a stinging cut on the flank. The animal reared at the first blow, and plunged forward at the second, with a force that nearly unseated Blanche, though she had instinctively apprehended Ben's warning, and taken the necessary precaution.

All this took but an instant of time—the report of the rifles—the appearance of the savages—the cut of Ben's whip; and though several leaped forward to grasp the bridle-rein, Selim passed them all at a bound and dashed away, bearing his mistress beyond their reach. One of the Indians hurled his tomahawk at her; but she saw it coming, and bowed to her horse's neck, and the weapon passed harmlessly over her head.

As for Ben, at the first discharge he felt a bullet pierce his arm, and another graze his temple.

His denial of being hurt was merely to guard against disheartening Blanche. His horse, too, was wounded in several places, and rearing on his hind feet, he turned round and darted off in the direction opposite to that taken by Blanche.

Burly Ben had only time to see several mounted Indians appear from the undergrowth and divide, some going in pursuit of Blanche, while others urged their horses hotly on his track.

CHAPTER III.

BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE.

NIGHT, in the enemy's camp.

In a little glade a conflict, characterized by the brief, yet savage energy of the whirlwind. The reports of firearms—the interchange of heavy blows, that fall with sickening thud—the clash of steel on steel—the gride of knife and tomahawk, slashing the quivering flesh to the bone—the yell of defiance—the death-rattle—the muffled fall on the turf! Then the glazed eye—the stiffening limbs—the lotting of crimson ooze, that dyes the green sward!

With a yell of terror, a single savage leaped away into the darkness, and two men held possession of the field.

"Blanche! my darling!" burst from the lips of one.

With a bound, he was at the side of a prostrate, motionless form. One slash of his bloody knife severed the ligature which bound her to the wrist of the dead savage at her side. Shuddering, he snatched her hand away from contact with that of her vanquished captor. Then, with all the father in a gaze of agonized inquiry, he passed a hand under her head, and raised it until the fitful light from the scattered embers fell upon her face. One moment he looked at the bloodless cheek and closed eyes, and then his nerveless hand refused its support; the head fell back limp and lifeless to the ground, and an inarticulate cry issued from his lips.

The remaining survivor of the fight knelt beside the motionless form of Harry Bearsley. With deft fingers, he examined a wound on the side of the head. He had just finished bandaging it, when the voice of Mr. Burbank, sounding strange and constrained, called him:

"Ben, for God's sake, come here!"

Burly Ben immediately arose, in response to the call, and passed to Mr. Burbank's side.

"Is she dead?" he asked in sudden awe, as he gazed on the motionless figure, and then on the despairing face of his companion.

"I don't know. Look for yourself," replied the father in a choking voice.

Burly Ben knelt and reverently lifted the head of the girl, so as to turn the still face to the firelight. Then a sudden exclamation escaped his lips, and he looked closer.

"Why, 'squire, 'tain't her!"

Without removing his face from his hands, Mr. Burbank replied:

"No; it is not she."

Burly Ben gazed upon the face of the stranger, for stranger she was, and scratched his head in a puzzled way.

"Squire," he said, presently, "I don't jist understand the signs, but it 'pears to me that we've been barkin' up the wrong tree, an' cotched a beaver—that's sartin."

"We have got off the trail in some way," assented Mr. Burbank; "but look after this poor child, Ben; I have not the heart. This is a bitter disappointment."

"Never mind, 'squire. Don't lose heart. They've dropped us to-day, but we'll come ag'in. It's an unlucky dog that don't get a bone one day in the week."

Lifting the unconscious girl carefully in his strong arms, Burly Ben bore her nearer the fire; and then laying her on the turf, damp and slippery in places with the blood of the combatants now still in death, he began to apply the simple restoratives at his command. She had escaped injury, and was merely in a swoon. Presently she revived, gazed about her wildly, and then shut her eyes, shuddering and cowering.

"Don't be afeared, marm," said Burly Ben in reassuring tones; "you're among friends. We've reskied ye from the Injins, an' won't see no harm come to ye."

The girl opened her eyes and gazed at him earnestly. Then, starting up, she clutched his arm and shrunk to his side, glancing nervously around in the darkness.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, "you have beaten them—the cruel Indians! They took me from my home. You will help me to get back? Oh, mother! mother!—they killed her! I have no home now."

She dropped her face into her hands, and gave way to a passion of tears.

"My poor child," said Mr. Burbank, "we should be thankful to heaven that we have been the means of releasing you from the terrible captivity which awaited you, though we came in search of another. What is your name, and where is your home?"

"I am Mary Edwards, sir," replied the girl, in a sweet voice, yet tremulous with grief. "I lived at the Aberdeen settlement. Oh, sir, these cruel savages burned our house; and poor, poor mother was sick and could not walk fast

enough, and they—and they— Oh, mother! mother!"

She broke forth into heart-rending wails, wringing her hands and rocking to and fro, her eyes wild with the awful horror of that ruthless butchery, where a mother had been stricken to the earth and left to welter in her blood at the feet of her child. Covering her eyes with her hands, to shut out the horrible vision, she bowed her head to her lap in utter abandonment of grief. Mr. Burbank gazed upon the heart-broken girl with the yearning pity of a father, whose own daughter had been torn from his arms, and was now exposed to he knew not what dangers. Tenderly he raised her up, drawing her head upon his shoulder, and supporting her with his arm. She clung to him with the unquestioning trust of a child—she was scarcely more—while sobs and shudders shook her slight frame.

When he had somewhat allayed the passion of her grief, Mr. Burbank told her the story of his daughter's loss and of the mistake which had led them to follow her, supposing her to be Blanche, which story we can convey to the reader in a very few words.

After escaping the Indians himself, Burly Ben returned in search of Blanche. He found where Selim had fallen to the earth, but there were no signs of his mistress being thrown in the road. Reading the signs, Ben learned that the horse then left the road and went some distance into the woods, where he had been captured by the savages. But a puzzling thing was that the savages had ridden about in concentric circles, as if searching for the trail of the rider.

Without settling this point, Ben followed the trail until he came to an encampment, where he saw a woman lying in the shadow whom he took to be Blanche. Selim, scenting the hunter, neighed in recognition, disturbing the Indians. The savage who came to see what might be the matter with the horses wore a plume, which Ben recognized as the one Blanche had worn in her hat. To gain this trophy the scout ran the risk of capture, but escaped after a brisk chase.

Thus misled, the father, lover and scout had followed the wrong trail for a week.

Having told these incidents, Mr. Burbank questioned the girl on the events of her captivity, to learn if she had seen anything which might aid them in their future course.

Burly Ben was an attentive listener to her replies, scratching his head in perplexity, until he suddenly burst forth:

"Squire, them Injins never clapped hands on Miss Blanche. When they found the hoss they went trampin' all around the 'bush. 'Cause why? Why, because Miss Blanche wa'n't there!"

"But where was she?"

"That's jist what the Injins wanted to know. An' I'll bet ye that leetle question stumped 'em. They gin it up. I told yer that the hoss come down kerwhop."

"Well?"

"But there wa'n't no signs o' the rider's gettin' throwed."

"Yes."

"'Cause why, again? Why, because there wa'n't no rider on."

In tracing up his line of argument, Burly Ben was in a glow of animation. His excitement was contagious; and Mr. Burbank awaited the development of his idea with growing anxiety.

"Explain yourself, Ben," he said.

"Squire Burbank," said Burly Ben, impressively, "your darter left that hoss' back before he fell in the road, before he went into the bush, before the Injins ketched him an' couldn't find her."

"Then you think that she was not taken, after all?"

"I think they didn't ketch her that time."

"Burly Ben, it seems to me pretty late in the day to think of all this, after you have led us over a hundred miles into the wilderness, and wasted a week's time."

Mr. Burbank's lips took a stern set, and his nostrils dilated with indignation, not unmixed with pain.

"Hold on, 'squire," replied Ben. "You're a straight up an' down man, an' not given to bein' unfair. I'm only a man, you know, an' liable to a man's mistakes."

"But you say that there were no signs of her having been thrown when the horse fell, and that the Indians, evidently looked for her after they took the horse. Why did you not see the significance of these things before?"

"I told ye before we set out that them things stumped me. 'Cause why? Why, because I thought they had the leetle gal, jist like a pound in yer pocket. Remember, I seen the hoss; I seen the gal—an' gals is all alike, when ye don't see their faces; more'n all that, I got the plume what she wore in her hat. I allow, there ain't many men as 'ud calkulate on one gal bein' sperited off, an' another put in her place. Thinkin' that the Injins had a-holt o' the gal, an' was makin' off with her, I allow there wa'n't much use o' palaverin' about how she got off her hoss—whether she tumbled off, or was handed down by a gay young cove in high-heeled boots."

There was just a little heat in Ben's manner, as was indicated by his choice of expression.

"I beg your pardon, Ben," said Mr. Burbank. "I see that I was unjust. You did all that man could do under the circumstances. I have much to thank you for."

"Let up, 'squire," said the now mollified Ben. "None o' that if you please. I'd go anywhere, or do anything for Miss Blanche."

"But, how could she have got off her horse, Ben, going at full speed? She was pursued by the savages."

"She might have pulled up an' jumped off, an' then sent the hoss on. But, as Selim could run them leetle Injin ponies clean out o' their hides, I don't see what fur she should do it."

"What are we to do now?" asked the father in a dejected tone. "If we go back, where can we find her? A week! What may not have happened to her in that time!"

Overcome with the reflection, he covered his face with his hands, while his frame shook with emotion. Mary Edwards clasped his arm with her hands, and laying her cheek against it whispered, with a woman's quick sympathy:

"Do not despair, dear sir. You may yet find her. God watches over us all!"

The last words were spoken in a tone of solemnity that made them an invocation. Mr. Burbank looked up and placed his hand on her head.

"God bless you, my child!" he said. "We must indeed rely upon Him. Will you pray to Him for our lost one?"

Instead of replying, the girl bent forward with a look first of fright, then of wonder and incredulity, then a blending of emotions which neither of the men could analyze, though the eyes of both were on her face, revealed by the clear light of the moon. With a suppressed cry, she half-started to her feet, and then sunk back again, trembling like a leaf, but never moving her eyes from the direction in which they were at first bent.

Mr. Burbank and Burly Ben turned to see Hal sitting erect, and on his pale and blood-stained face an expression which was a reflection of that which had startled them in Mary Edwards. They did not ask themselves, but we may ask: Was there any connection between these two? if so, what? And, missing Blanche, had they rescued a woman who was destined to be instrumental in saving her from a peril even greater than Indian captivity?

CHAPTER IV.

INSNARED.

SELIM was limping. In riding down a savage he had made a misstep and sprained his knee. Miles lay between Blanche Burbank and safety; and she asked herself how long her steed, gallant as she knew him to be, would maintain his pace.

On! on! until she could no longer hear the clang of the pursuing hoof; yet she knew that it was following, with the abatement of not one whit of its fell purpose. The Indians had detected the animal's mishap, and had settled down to a long race. And now the pace of her horse became more and more labored. Sweat trickled from his flanks and foam flew from the bit, dappling his broad chest.

Despairingly Blanche gazed down the road in advance, though she knew that deliverance was yet far distant; but there she was confronted by a new terror. Around a bend a cloud of dust announced the approach of other horsemen. In dismay she drew rein, glancing right and left for an avenue of escape; but while she paused the riders swept into view. With her heart in her mouth she gazed at them to determine their character, and discovered—two white men!

A cry of relief rippled from her lips as she urged her horse toward them.

"Oh, sirs, turn back! turn back!" she cried, waving her hand.

Both drew rein and waited for her to come up. As she approached the elder of the men uttered a smothered ejaculation of recognition.

"By Heaven! it is she!"

A moment later he wheeled his horse and rode at her side.

Blanche stated the situation rapidly.

The man looked over his shoulder at the approaching cloud of dust, then glanced at his companion meaningly.

"Ha! ha!" he mused, "the devil is playing into my hand. Well, he ought to; for I serve him well. Were you alone, madame?" he asked aloud.

"No, I was with Ben Burleigh. Do you know him?"

"Ah! Burly Ben? By my soul! we're old chums. Many's the hunt we've had together. But he's not captured, surely?"

"No, I think he escaped. His horse carried him the other way."

"Your horse is lame. But he does not seem to be wounded—there is no blood. Has he had a fall?"

"No. I do not know how he was hurt. It was either during the attack or immediately afterward. I fear that he will not be able to carry me to a place of safety."

"Madame, I beg that you will look upon my son and me as your protectors. If worst comes

to worst we'll show these savages what resolute men can do in a pinch. Hal!"

The exclamation was caused by Selim's stumbling. Blanche uttered a quick cry, as she felt her horse sinking under her, and disengaged her foot from the stirrup. The arm of the stranger shot out and encircled her waist; and with a powerful effort he lifted her to his horse's withers.

"It is better so, madame," said the stranger deferentially. "My horse can easily carry double. Yours was a noble animal, but he is now useless."

Blanche thanked him with a look, and then gazed regretfully back at Selim.

"Sidney, we must dodge them at the cut-off," said the elder, addressing his son with a look which the other evidently comprehended. With a nod he spurred on ahead and suddenly dashed into a bridle-path, closely followed by the other.

"This will bring us to a place of temporary safety," said the stranger to Blanche. "My own animals are so well spent that I dare not risk a long race double-weighted."

They now rode at a less rapid pace, which was partially necessitated by the roughness of the way. The sun was far down the west when the men drew rein in the midst of a rocky valley. Having secured their horses in a dense clump of undergrowth, the elder man led Blanche to the mouth of a cave, which they entered. He soon ignited a torch which dispelled the dense gloom.

"The Indians will not follow us here, Miss—Miss—I have not inquired your name. Mine is Swanton—William Swanton, at your service; and this is my son, Sidney."

"I am the daughter of Carlton Burbank, sir," said Blanche.

"Ah! I have heard him spoken of as a man of sterling qualities. Well, Miss Burbank, you will be perfectly secure here, for the present at least. I will leave Sidney with you for company, while I go out and scout a bit. I have a family of my own to look after, if this danger be widespread." And he left the cave.

It was hours before Swanton returned, and when he did appear it was with a look of concern. Blanche was surprised to see him accompanied by a woman with a sharp nose and faded blue eyes that regarded her curiously.

"Miss Burbank, my wife," said Swanton.

Blanche received her gracefully. The woman stared at her, glanced at her husband, flushed slightly, and finally dropped an awkward courtesy, without a word. Blanche did not see the warning from which Swanton gave his wife.

He immediately began to speak.

"The danger is much more extended than I thought. The country is fairly swarming with Indians, who are burning and slaughtering in every direction. Our people are flying their homes for safety; but they are met on every side. It would be hopeless for you to attempt to reach your home, Miss Burbank; and even if you succeeded, you would in all probability find your people gone. You are heartily welcome to such protection as we can give. I have secured a horse for you."

"But, sir, I must endeavor to reach my home. What will my parents think has become of me? I must get to them!"

"Miss Burbank, I heartily sympathize with you; but you cannot ask me to endanger the liberty of not the life of my wife by attempting to assist you in so hopeless an undertaking. You will readily see that it will be better for your parents to fear for your safety for a few days at most, than to mourn your irrecoverable loss; for, once captured, your rescue would be hopeless indeed."

"I see the force of your reasoning, sir," replied Blanche, "and that I must avail myself of your hospitality until the danger is past. My father will know how to thank you for protecting his daughter."

Ten minutes later the party was again in the saddle, picking their way carefully through the darkness.

On an eminence Swanton stopped and swept his arm over the view. This gesture and silence were more impressive than words. The sky was red with conflagration in all directions but one, and that one he was pursuing.

All night they traveled, and lay in hiding during the day. Twice was this repeated, and then Swanton changed his plan, traveling during the daytime. All this time they had met not a living soul. The country through which they were passing was one vast wilderness. At the end of the first day's jaunt, the third since the ambush, the clouds which had so long veiled the firmament broke away, and the sun burst through just as he hung upon the horizon. His level rays told Blanche a story which sent the blood back on her heart, in a sickening tide. *They were going westward!*

All atremble, yet feigning calmness, Blanche addressed Swanton:

"Mr. Swanton, where are we going?"

"Oh, to a place that will be safe enough," he replied, carelessly.

With a thrill she noticed that his suavity had given place to careless freedom in his demeanor toward her.

"How long before we will reach a place of security?" was her next question.

He glanced at her sharply, and then tapping his boot with his whip, replied:

"We'll get there fast enough. As you see, we have to travel slowly; but you will arrive with the rest of us. We'll have pleasanter weather, I'm thinking."

With that he went to attend to his horses, and left Blanche standing in sore perplexity. Far into the night she lay awake in troubled thought. A thousand little things about her companions arose before her mind, to awaken anxiety. The next morning she again addressed herself to her guide.

"Mr. Swanton," she said, quietly, looking straight into his face, "where are you taking me to?"

He stopped buckling the surcingle, and with one arm resting across the saddle, gazed at her with a curious half-smile on his lips. He saw a pale, yet firm-set face, and a clear, steady eye.

"Plucky!" he muttered; and then aloud asked what seemed a very irrelevant question:

"Your father is a rich man, is he not?"

With a quick heart-throb she replied:

"My father is rich; but what of that?"

"I am a poor man!" said Swanton; and an ominous frown darkened his brows, and he compressed his lips into hard, cruel lines.

"May I ask what I am to make of all this?" asked Blanche.

"Did you never hear of one man trading on the affections of another?"

"What do you mean?" asked Blanche. Every trace of color faded from her lips, but she eyed him unflinchingly.

Swanton laughed lightly.

"You're clear grit," he said. "It won't hurt you to be a few weeks from your mamma. To be frank with you, I intend to better my worldly condition by holding you for ransom. I have taken my cue from the green-wood lords of Italy."

"I am to consider myself a prisoner?"

"Until the anxiety of your fond parent induces the offering of a large reward for your recovery. Some hints of my own may stimulate him."

We shall not attempt to describe the emotions of Blanche Burbank at thus finding herself in the hands of a confessed kidnapper. From him she looked to the hard, unfeeling face of his wife, who had stopped in her occupation of gathering up the cooking utensils with which their breakfast had been prepared, to listen to the words of her husband. There was no sympathy there, only peevishness and acerbity.

Swanton turned and drew the girth to its proper tension, and then placed his hand on his knee to assist Blanche to mount. Only an instant she hesitated; then she placed her foot in his palm and sprang lightly into the saddle.

"By Heaven! she's a queen!" muttered Swanton, in undisguised admiration. "I wish I was young myself. That young dog don't deserve her, after all I've plotted and planned for him; and, blast him! he shan't have her. I'll teach him to laugh in my face! If he had been half as tractable as Sidney—the young hound!—all would have been well. But, he'll rue it, curse him!—he'll rue it!"

As he gave the reins into her hand, he addressed Blanche aloud.

"You will see the folly of attempting to escape—you're sensible enough for that. Alone in the woods you have starvation and the Indians to face; with me there is the inconvenience of a few weeks' separation from your parents and the expense of a few thousands for your restoration. A word to the wise—you know the proverb."

His caution was unnecessary; she had grasped the situation before he spoke.

CHAPTER V.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

HARRY BEARSLEY had recovered consciousness and now sat upright; his ghastly face dabbled with blood which trickled slowly from beneath the bandage Ben had made, and his eyes fixed upon Mary Edwards with a stare of bewilderment apparently not unmixed with fear.

"Merciful Heaven! Hal, you look like a ghost!" said Mr. Burbank. "Lie down again, boy, or you'll faint away."

With a long-drawn breath and a shiver Hal removed his eyes from the girl, as if breaking away from a fascination, and turned them upon Mr. Burbank. As if this action broke the spell which bound her, Mary Edwards started to her feet, and with a tremendous cry sprang to his side. As she reached him, he uttered a single word in a muffled tone and sunk back upon the turf. It was:

"Beware!"

The girl caught her breath and gazed back at Mr. Burbank and Ben in affright, carrying her hands to her bosom. The next moment she recovered herself and knelt beside the wounded man, beginning to chafe his hand between her own tremulous ones, while she gazed at him with eyes whose passionate solicitude would not be concealed. He withdrew his hand, gave her one swift frown of warning, and closed his eyes,

just as Mr. Burbank came to his side. The girl drew back with a stifled sob, while quick tears sprang to her eyes and hung upon her long lashes.

All this by-play had passed unobserved by Mr. Burbank, as he did not see the faces of the actors.

"My dear boy," he said, bending over Hal and taking his hand, "do you know?—we have fallen into an error. We have not rescued the dear girl after all, but another equally unfortunate."

"I know," said Hal, without opening his eyes.

Burly Ben now appeared with the water in his cap; and the young girl began to bathe Hal's face. After a draught from Burly Ben's canteen, Hal sat upright again, declaring himself "almost as good as new."

"Well," said Burly Ben, "if that beggarly heathen who made off with the horses should chance to fall in with some more o' his stripe, I reckon they'd make this place warmer'n 'ud be agreeable to us. I vote that we move on, if Master Hal kin walk. If he can't, we'll have to help him."

"You need not be detained on my account," said Hal, rising to his feet. The liquor had revived the physical man, and the behavior of Mary Edwards had removed a sickening weight of apprehension from his mind. He now turned and addressed her with the formal courtesy due to a stranger.

"I thank you, madam, for your attentions to me. At the same time I congratulate you on your fortunate escape, if it does not seem premature, surrounded as we still are by dangers; while I am gratified to have been even partially instrumental in your rescue."

The girl listened to him with downcast eyes, her face first crimson and then pale as a lily. With an effort she replied in the same tone:

"Sir, all thanks are due from me to you, who have so nearly sacrificed your life in my behalf. My gratitude is too deep for words."

The little party moved through the forest under the direction of Burly Ben, who took every precaution to conceal their trail, the feet of all having been first bundled in blankets taken from the dead Indians. It was nearly midnight when the scout commanded a halt, saying:

"There ain't no copper-face goin' to pick up that trail before mornin', anyway."

It was arranged that Harry should watch two hours and then awaken the scout.

Wearily men do not long lie awake, and so the heavy breathing of Mr. Burbank and Burly Ben announced that they were in deep, dreamless slumber.

Harry Bearsley sat with his face in shadow. "Curse her!" he muttered, "why has her father and my good friend, the devil"—with a bitter sneer—"sent her across my path? She will discover everything—and then!"

He paused and grated his teeth in rage.

"Sleep!" he laughed, his mind recurring to his discussion with Ben; "I'll have little sleep until—"

Again he broke off. Then, with clenched hands and set teeth he hissed:

"Friends! but ten thousand Mary Edwards shall not stand between me and my purpose! Ay, I'll win now, if only to spite that old sinner who had his pass to perdition putting me in the shoes I wear, before he found that he could not use me as he liked. Bah! he lied to me! And yet—and yet— Oh! curse them all!"

"Charley!"

Harry Bearsley started as if the fold of a serpent had come in contact with his flesh, as a cold hand was placed on the back of his, and the name was spoken scarcely above a whisper. So absorbed had he been in his meditations that he had not observed Mary Edwards' approach.

"The devil!" he said angrily. "When did you turn ghost? Go and lie down. If it were discovered that we are acquainted, it would ruin all."

Passing over his words, she asked in a steady voice:

"Why do they call you Harry?"

"Because that is my name," he said, with a light laugh.

The girl shivered.

"You have deceived me," she said.

"I have deceived my dear relatives worse," he replied. "Mary, this is no time to discuss this matter. Either of those men might be aroused by our voices, and then our cake would be dough. Remember, we're in the same boat. If you sink me, you put your own head under water."

"Charley, I'd go anywhere, suffer anything with you!" said the girl, with a longing tenderness that shook her voice and brought the tears to her eyes. "But let us withdraw where they cannot hear us. Remember, I haven't seen you or heard from you for two months and over. I've counted every day."

"Excuse me for want of sympathy with your willingness to go anywhere and suffer anything, as you phrase it. You know that 'love in a cottage,' and all that sort of thing, won't do for me. I'd rather hang than rot in a poky little hole, with nothing but the four walls to look at, if I had the Angel Gabriel for company."

As for withdrawing out of hearing, there'd be a pretty mess if Burly Ben was to wake up and find us skylarking together on the first evening of our acquaintance."

He laughed, not at all an amused sort of laugh, and added:

"Come, lie down, and perhaps I'll get an opportunity to speak to you to-morrow. Meanwhile, mum's the word, or you knock the bottom out of everything."

"I can't sleep until I've said what I have to say. Let us stay here; and if any one awakens, I'll say that I was nervous and came to talk to you for company."

"You were always very persistent, Miss Edwards. I suppose I shall have to listen. Please be as brief as is consistent with the thorough relief of your mind."

The girl gazed at him with a still despair in her face. He did not deign to look at her. Swallowing the lump that seemed to swell in her throat, she said:

"You say that your name is Harry. What is your other name—your surname?"

"Bearsley—Harry Bearsley, at your service," sneered he.

The girl seemed stung by his tone. With a wave of emotion that sent the blood into her cheeks, she said with sudden heat:

"If you are Harry Bearsley, who—what am I?"

"The devil, woman! you're not sounding an attack! For God's sake, lower your voice! One more such shout and you may be a pauper, with a cursed poor stick of a—"

"Harry Bearsley," she interrupted, in a more guarded tone, "tell me—what am I?"

"Hang it all! you're my beloved spouse, I suppose. You're giving a devilish unromantic reality to it by this curtain lecture."

"Harry Bearsley, you married me under an assumed name. Will that stand the test of law?"

"Would it be at all convenient for you to lower your voice a trifle?" I have no desire to announce myself to my friends here as a candidate for the poorhouse, if you have. I have a lively appreciation of the compliment conveyed in your words—I am in the habit of going about the country marrying unsuspecting girls, with my groom for the parson. Isn't that the way they do it?"

"Was our marriage legal?" repeated the girl.

"I suppose I must explain. You are as suspicious now as you were trusting when you honored me with your preference. Know, then, that my real name appeared in the license, though I was known to you to the last only by my assumed name."

"I did not see the license."

"As I said, you were simplicity on a pedestal, but the name was there, nevertheless."

"But why pass under an assumed name?"

"If I should run the risk of having the ears of my revered guardian tickled by such titbits of gossip, as that I was paying marked attention to this young lady or that young lady, don't you think the money would soon burn a hole in my pocket, and all run out before it got fairly in?"

"But you might have undeceived me when you made me your wife."

"It is with no disrespect, believe me, that I remind you that ladies are proverbially accredited with long tongues. If you knew nothing, you could tell nothing; don't you see? Have you any further questions to ask, Mrs. Bearsley?"

She caught her breath at the name, and a faint flush came into her cheek. She had been seated beside him; she rose to her knees and extended her arms toward him.

"Harry," she said, in a whisper, "one sign that you love me still! Oh, my husband, do not deny me!"

"I suppose that our conversation is the natural forerunner of violent demonstrations of affection. You ask me if I am guilty of a felony, and I reply with protestations of undying love."

"Forgive me, my husband! You can never know the agony I have endured for the last three hours. It was all the more intense because I loved you so; because I could not help loving you, even when I thought that you had wronged me as only a man can wrong a woman!"

"Such love as you profess is not usually quite so suspicious, unless I am much mistaken," persisted Harry, though by his manner he appeared to be softening.

The girl caught at this ray of hope, and bending forward passed her arms about his neck. Touching her cold lips to his cheek, she murmured:

"Husband! my husband! let us cease. We cannot become reconciled by recrimination. I know that I have annoyed you; but henceforth I will trust you utterly, unquestioningly! Only love me—show me that you love me! Charley, my darling, kiss me!"

He put his arm about her; he drew her upon his breast; he stroked her hair with what had the seeming of a fond touch; he kissed her lips and said:

"Mary, such scenes as this are well calculated to alienate the strongest love. You must trust me, my darling—"

"I will! I will!" she interrupted.

"And wait until such time as I can acknowledge you before the world. Be sure that I will do it at the soonest possible moment. I await the time as anxiously as do you."

"Oh, bless you, my husband! This is the happiest moment of my life!"

"Now go and sleep. We must not appear to know each other."

One moment she strained him in her arms; one moment she pressed her lips, all glowing now, to his; and then stole silently away, to tell her happiness to her God.

And he?—with lips curling in fierce scorn, he muttered:

"Bah! what a fool I was when I jeopardized everything for an empty-headed doll! But I've silenced her for a time. Curse her! if she becomes troublesome, I'll silence her for—"

He had nearly said *forever*; but his tongue faltered on the word; and shuddering he drew his hat closer over his eyes, and continued his vigils in moody silence.

CHAPTER VI.

A DARK COMPACT.

NIGHT in the Minnesota wilderness. In the background a tent and picketed horses. In the foreground two men conversing on the bank of a stream.

"Look here, Sid, there's no use of your glowering and sulking. If you've got anything to say, say it."

"Well, I hain't got no fault to find; but I allow it looks to me as if you was totting me about the country without much purpose, when I might be doing something for myself."

"It's odd that you didn't have on this industrious fit before we set out. Your general uselessness was not unendurably oppressive then."

"There has to be a beginning sometime; and I've about made up my mind that I've got to the end of my rope in this direction, anyway," persisted Sidney, doggedly.

The cause of his defection at this particular time was a quarrel with his father that afternoon.

"Do you mean to say that you purpose to throw up your hand and go back now?"

"I don't see anything to hinder."

There was no defiant glance, no drawing up of the body, but in the tone of voice there was a bull-dog pertinacity of purpose that warned the elder man that "Greek had met Greek"—he was fighting his own spirit in his son.

"You would leave me in the midst of an Indian country with two women on my hands, in the safety of one of whom you would naturally be supposed to feel some slight interest since she is your mother."

"I didn't tell her to come," was the sententious and filial reply.

"This affair may interest you in another way," suggested the father.

"I allow I'm about tired following a blind lead. You've been throwing out hints; but you always was too deep for me."

"What would you do if you went back?"

"There's a place in the army waiting for me, for the asking."

"Bah! I guess your thinking of the Edwards army more than anything else. I thought you had got over that folly."

"There are worse girls than she."

"Sidney, there are better."

"She has a snug little property, for one recommendation."

"There are those that have more."

"They don't go around begging some one to take care of it for 'em, though."

"Supposing one of them was to drop at your feet to-day?"

"I'd like to have one of them try it."

"Would the Edwards stand in the way?"

"No."

"One thing more. Suppose your wife was not particularly in love with you?"

"I fancy that could be got along without, if my pockets were kept well lined."

"Sidney, there's just such a plum waiting to drop into your mouth!"

"The devil there is! Where?"

Swanton bent forward until he rested his hand on his son's knee, and looking close into his face, said:

"Miss Burbank!"

The young man stared and then burst into a laugh. Had he not done so, they might have heard the snapping of a twig, as a dark figure which was moving toward them stopped and drew back into the shadow of a tree. When Sidney recovered from his hilarity, he said:

"Oh thunder! Old man, I guess you're passing into your dotage, unless you've had more than usual to drink."

"Fools laugh at their own folly," said Swanton, the elder, not much relishing being laughed at.

"But, what in Cain would she want of me? Miss Burbank! Pugh!"

"What difference does it make whether she wants you or not, if you want her? Remember, there's a pile of money waiting for you when you're her husband."

"But there's two parties to that little contract."

"Not always. I'll find a priest fast enough, who'll not be over inquisitive as to the lady's consent."

The moonlight fell upon an anxious face that peered for a moment from the bushes and then retreated again into the shadow.

"But such a marriage would have no binding force."

"Yes it would, if the lady acknowledged it afterward."

"Which she wouldn't be fool enough to do. If it's all the same to you, you can play a lone hand in this little game. I ain't particularly anxious to hire out to break stone or pick oakum for nothing a day and found."

"If you are idiot enough to go on a fool's errand without knowing where you are coming out, please give me credit for a little more sense. Do you suppose that I haven't looked at this matter on all sides? I've had twenty years and more to think about it. Carlton Burbank and I didn't meet for the first time yesterday, nor last week!"

An ugly scowl darkened the brown face of the man as he spoke—a scowl of deadly hate. His son looked at him questioningly.

"I always knewed that this was a deep game," he said. "But suppose I marry her against her will—for of course it would have to be so—what then? She's not going to take me to her old man and present me as her loving husband whom she picked up in the woods, and ask him to set us up in business?"

"She will never see her father, so as to present you as anything."

"Oh, are we to lay low and wait for the governor's shoes? But the old dufer might live twenty years."

"You'll not have to wait over a twelve-month."

The fierce scowl of hate came back to William Swanton's face. His son started and turned slightly pale.

"Do you ask me to take a hand in such a game as that?" he asked.

"You do nothing but enjoy domestic felicity in an out-of-the-way place, until your fortune is runny for you. I will attend to all the rest. Do you consent?"

"If I refuse?"

"We part company right here, and I'll look up somebody who isn't such a blasted fool."

There was white rage in the face of the elder man, as he rose to his feet, with clenched hands and blazing eyes.

"Well, I don't see no cause to throw up my hand yet," said his son, also rising.

"Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"Swear that you will not go back on your engagement."

"If that is all that is required of me, I swear."

"That's enough!"

As Swanton turned to walk toward the tent, he ground his teeth and clenched his hands, while a look of fendish malignity disfigured his face.

"Ah!" he muttered, "the man that tramples Tom Tracy in the mire must look out for himself! One in the mountains, and one at his own fireside—curse them! I'll be even with them yet!"

In the undergrowth, as he passed, a shrinking, cowering figure, with bloodless lips and wildly-palpating heart, drew closer and closer into the shadow. The two men wrapped their blankets about them, and stretched themselves before the door of the tent. Then deep silence filled the wood.

CHAPTER VII.

BLANCHE'S PERIL.

WITH tremulous, tottering limbs, Blanche Burbank was fleeing through the night—anywhere, anywhere away from the heartless villains who were so ruthlessly plotting the blighting of her life. Hunger and exposure lay before her; but the trees and overhanging rocks must be her shelter, and she must keep the life in her weary body with the berries and succulent herbs which she could gather, until she came to the abodes of those who would open their hearts to the suffering and guide her back to her home. Long miles stretched between, and savage foes lay hidden in the way; but the dangers before her were in no way commensurate with the revolting horror she was leaving behind.

Fortunately she had changed her riding-habit for a linsey-woolsey gown belonging to Mrs. Swanton, or the long skirts of the other would have hopelessly impeded her movements.

Suddenly it occurred to her that pursuit would be directed along the line of march, as her enemies would suppose that she had naturally sought to regain her home by retracing their steps. She had often listened to stories of forest adventure from Burly Ben. She now called to her aid some of the knowledge thus gained.

Reaching a point where the way crossed a spot of rocky ground, she remembered that there was a similar one a little way beyond, and kept on until she reached it. Here she removed her shoes, as also the linsey-woolsey skirt, which she had borrowed of Mrs. Swanton, and the

velvet jacket which had formed part of her riding-habit.

Going to the edge of the rocky ground, she spread out the skirt and stepped upon it, being careful that her foot should press the ground evenly. Beyond this she laid the jacket, and stepped upon that. Turning, she took up the skirt and examined the ground, to see if her weight had made any mark. With a glad cry she saw the success of her plan. By this careful process, alternately stepping upon the skirt and jacket, she retraced her way to the first spot of rocky ground.

Following the rocky point at right angles with the trail until she came to its border, she repeated the process by which she had gained it, until she reached a distance of several rods.

She now donned dress and shoes, and set out on a course diagonal to the trail she had been following, keeping her direction by the moon and stars, which were revealed here and there though the foliage. But scarcely an hour had passed, when clouds so low that they nearly swept the tree-tops, obscured the sky. Though there was still light enough for her to see to pursue her way, the cloud-pall seemed equally luminous at all points, and she could form no judgment as to the position of her guide the moon. Still she struggled on.

How long she continued thus she knew not; but after hours of weary toil, the sky was again clear.

Suddenly she stopped with a tremulous cry. In the center of a patch of moonlight lay a footprint, as if to challenge her scrutiny. With a sinking heart she placed her foot in it. It fitted exactly.

While the moon was hidden from sight and she had nothing to guide her, she had fallen into that fatal snare of the lost traveler—she had gone in a circle!

She could form no idea as to the extent of that circle; she could not even judge whether she had made only one circuit or more. She only knew that she was crossing her own trail at some point; and that meant a waste of all the time which had intervened since she was last on the spot. Perhaps, after all her struggle, not more than two or three miles lay between her and her worse than deadly foes. At the thought, weary as she was, she almost started into a run.

"Mother! mother!" she whispered aloud, in the awful agony of that moment, "I may never see you again—never, never!"

Tears of utter weariness and discouragement stood in her eyes, and her lip quivered like the lip of a grieved child. But her brave heart never faltered. She had no thought of giving up the struggle. On she toiled—on, on, on, until head swam and knees tottered beneath her weight.

As she passed a thicket she was electrified by a deep, guttural sound which issued from its midst. She did not stop to ask herself what it was, but darted away like a startled fawn. The sound was repeated; there was a swaying of the bushes; they parted, giving exit to a dark object; then there was the regular fall of feet in pursuit.

The way was rocky, but she was all unconscious of the pain in her bruised feet. Suddenly she slipped and fell. Her pursuer was coming nearer—nearer! She tried to rise; but her foot was wedged firmly in the rock. Still that horrible, shuffling tread approached—nearer, nearer, until a dark form appeared to view; and she knew that it was an animal of some sort. Her imagination pictured all the horror of the moment when he should be upon her. She felt his hot breath on her cheek. She felt his teeth lacerating her flesh. With the terror of imminent and cruel death upon her, she tore her foot from the shoe, and springing up, she darted away again.

The sharp stones bruised her tender feet; but she heeded it not. Only an instant did the animal stop to sniff the shoe, and then came on at a quickened gallop. He gained upon her—was at her very heels! With a cry she leaped aside, blindly, with only the physical instinct of self-preservation, which struggles till the last instant, and burst through a tangled coppice. Then she was conscious of a slipping, sliding, dizzy descent—a loosening of stones and sand—a wild clutching in the air—a shock—oblivion!

CHAPTER VIII.

WRINGING A WOMAN'S HEART.

"MOTHER! mother! would to God they had sent me with you!"

Mary Edwards lay with her face buried in the turf, and her hot tears falling fast upon it.

She had left her husband to go and lie down with her eyes closed and her hands clasped over her bosom, the sorrow of the orphan struggling with the great joy that sprung from the re-establishment of confidence between her and him. Too restless to continue alone, she had sought Burly Ben, after he had relieved Hal, and the garrulous old fellow had told her all about Blanche and her relations with Hal. And now the deceived wife lay prone on the ground, writhing in anguish.

When the breaking of the dawn awoke the

others, they found her thus, wrapped in deep, yet troubled slumber.

It was decided to keep on westward, in the hope of overtaking the party with Blanche.

With a heavy heart the father followed the guide, as this seemed the only hope. The sun was an hour high, when they came upon a trail which Burly Ben pronounced a fresh one.

"Them lopin' scallawags have been by here since the dew fell," said he; "an' as they hain't no call to go galavantin' round in the night time, o' course it's been since daybreak. Now I propose that you, 'squire, an' Hal an' the gal squat in the bush, while I go on a little scout. We've got to git a squint at every party o' reds that we fall in with, so's not to lose any chances."

"Ben, I must accompany you," said Mr. Burbank. "I can't bear the idea of remaining inactive, when my child may be in the hands of this very party, for all we know. Hal can stay and protect Miss Edwards. With his wound, he needs all the rest he can get."

This was agreed to; and leaving Hal and Mary in a dense clump of undergrowth, the two set out.

Left alone with Hal, Mary sat with a look of stony immobility on her countenance, which it had worn ever since she had been awakened. Hal had observed it with no little misgiving, at a loss to determine its cause. He now drew to her side, and laying his hand on her shoulder, said:

"Mary, what has come over you? Why do you look so?"

The girl recoiled from his touch with a low cry, and turning, looked him full in the face.

"Do not touch me!" she said, with a shudder.

"There was a time when the weight of your hand was the dearest sensation of which I was susceptible. Henceforward contact with you can only be loathsome to me!"

A purple flush mounted to his brow, and a slumbersome fire gleamed in his eye; but he conquered his sudden passion, and said, with a sneer:

"I confess that I am at a loss to account for your fickleness of mind. Last night you were in a melting mood; this morning you have got on your high-tragedy airs again."

"Harry Bearsley," cried the girl, with sudden vehemence, "I would not have believed that a fiend, not to say a man, could be guilty of such duplicity as as you have practiced!"

"Complimentary, as usual, but even more than ordinarily enigmatical. Pray, explain yourself."

"Your effrontery cannot avail you. How could you hope it would? One word from me to Mr. Burbank, and you are ruined."

"And you have not spoken that terrible word?"

"You know that I have said nothing to him."

"You promise to be almost as reserved with me. At least you are so oracular that there is no making anything of what you say. When that awful mine is sprung, I shan't know which way to jump."

"Harry Bearsley, while you slept last night, I was in conversation with the man you call Burly Ben."

"Ah! nice company."

"And he told me everything!"

"Indeed?"

And he yawned in her face.

"Excuse me," he said, putting his hand before his mouth; "but you know my rest was broken."

She gazed at him in wonder. She had but to open her lips and brand him as a villain of the deepest dye; yet he sat there without the movement of a muscle.

"Harry Bearsley," she cried, with clenched hands and flashing eyes, "do you suppose for an instant that I will sit quietly and see this iniquity go on? Do you suppose that I will allow you to marry Miss Burbank, when I do not know but what you are my husband? Heaven help me! I do not know that you are!"

Without a change of feature, he said:

"I have no desire to marry Miss Burbank. The wife whom I have is a legion in herself. Gad! but I have my hands full already."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. My experience goes to show that wives are a commodity, a little of which goes a great way."

"But Burly Ben told me that you were engaged to Miss Burbank—that you were to marry her by Christmas."

"Burly Ben has been telling you a nursery tale."

She stopped and looked at him steadily. He sat rubbing a blood-stain from the stock of his rifle, quietly, without a trace of nervousness. His perfect coolness staggered her. What if there was some mistake, after all? And yet, Ben had spoken with positiveness. He had no motive for deceiving her. The more she thought, the more bewildering became the problem.

"Will you explain yourself?" she asked, in a faltering voice.

"He looked up at her with a sudden flash in his eyes. It was of triumph; but before she detected it, it had given place to a sneer."

"Must it be the old story over again?" he asked. "Ain't it getting to be a great deal of a

bore?—accusation, vindication. I have no objection to the first process, since there seems to be no escape, but spare me the second. But no; pardon my forgetfulness; henceforth my touch is to be loathsome to you. Ah, well, I don't know but we'll get on nicely, after all."

She gazed at him now with an awful sinking sensation—a chilling dread. Had she wronged him again? Could he explain it all? He would never forgive her. With scalding tears welling into her eyes, and one by one burning their fiery course down her cheeks, she waited.

"Burly Ben told you that Miss Burbank and myself were betrothed since our childhood, did he not?"

"Yes."

"Did it occur to you that the principal parties could have had very little to do with such a contract, at so tender an age? That, having come to years of discretion, one or both of the parties might feel a disinclination to ratify the engagement entered into so fondly by their beloved parents?"

"But he said that you were to be married by Christmas."

"Humph! What easier than for a garrulous old gossip to be mistaken in such matters? Miss Burbank cares nothing for me. I admire her beauty and accomplishments, without caring a straw for her affections. My respected sire made the inheritance of his accumulations contingent upon my remaining a bachelor until Miss Burbank's twentieth birthday, in case she was not betrothed to another before that time, and presenting myself as a candidate for her hand. The lady's birthday falls in the next month. Do not take it as uncomplimentary that I endured to forego even your charming society, in consideration of the few thousands which were to keep us in bread and butter during the coming years of our felicity."

"This is not the story that you told me when you insisted on our marriage being kept secret," said the girl, suspiciously.

"Further explanation?" he asked, arching his brows contemptuously. "You have yourself to thank that it is not. As deep as was my infatuation when you honored me with your preference, it did not blind me to a slight foible in your character, commonly known as jealousy. I had every reason to fear that, if you suspected the presence of another lady in the field, you would be shy about entering into competition with her for my affections; and I think my experience of the last twelve hours goes far to confirm the correctness of my judgment. Rather than lose your precious self, I fear that I strained the moral code on more occasions than one, during that interesting period of my life. When Miss Burbank reaches the stipulated age, if we succeed in rescuing her from the Indians, I shall offer her my hand in marriage, in conformity with the conditions of the will. As I more than half suspect,"—and the speaker inwardly ground his teeth with rage—"she has already bestowed her affections elsewhere, and of course will decline the honor, etc. I shall then do you the tardy justice of acknowledging you before the world; or rather marry you over again, this time openly. I have no doubt that our honeymoon will be a glorious one. If you are satisfied now, you know the adage—'Silence is golden.'"

He leaned against the tree which grew out of the midst of their retreat, and closed his eyes, as if in weariness.

"Charley!" breathed the girl, addressing him with the name by which she had known him in the happy days of their courtship and during that brief trance of stolen delights, when she had called him "husband," and felt that not one in all their little world knew of the golden tie that bound them; and with the name came all the old tenderness—"Charley!"

He did not open his eyes.

"I know what you would say," he replied. "But just think, you will have all our lives to say it in. Corroborate my story, please, by such information as you can get from Mr. Burbank without betraying our secret. A little angling will do it. You are quite a detective. But now let me rest."

"Forgive me!" she wailed.

"I have nothing to forgive. You are merely looking after your own interests. That's business. Go on with the investigation. Only you've pumped me dry. Aren't you satisfied with that?"

She did not speak to him again. She only sat and gazed at him, feeling as one who had willfully shattered the vase which contained the perfume of her life. Oh, if she could but touch the bandage which bound his temples! But with her own hand she had raised up the barrier between them, and now she must abide her work.

So she was found by Mr. Burbank on his return. She was in a fever of suppressed excitement; but the unutterable woe in her face won him for a moment even from the all-engrossing thought which filled his mind and heart; and before he spoke to Hal, he murmured to himself:

"Poor child, how she has suffered!"

Then he said in a whisper:

"Harry, God be praised, we have found her."

"Not herself, Master Hal," said Ben, seeing the

young man start; "only the mark of her foot—God bless her pretty pacter! I'd know it among a thousand."

In the fight by which they must rescue Blanche the men could not be trammelled by the care of woman. So, hiding her in a coppice, they left the tortured wife with her face in her hands and her heart pouring out a fervent prayer for the protection, not of herself, but of her husband.

While looking down at the delicate footprint, which Ben recognized by the impression of some of his own handiwork in mending Blanche's shoe, they were startled by the sounds heard by Walter Weston and Bantam in our first chapter—two rifle-shots, an interval of silence, a chorus of wild yells, a third shot, and a woman's shriek rising clear and shrill.

Mr. Burbank laid a tremulous hand on the arm of the scout.

"Ben, my child!—they have killed her!" he whispered with bloodless lips.

A strange look came into Harry's face. It was of anger and disappointment, rather than grief.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNSEEN TERROR.

A DEAFENING, reverberating roar, that seemed to rock the earth to its very center—a blinding flash, as if the heavens had rent in twain and enveloped the world in a flood of lurid flame—a sickening horror of suffocation—a crash like the felling of mighty forests—a pandemonium of sounds, like the growls and snarls of wild beasts, blended with the warning cries of human beings—then the clear ringing report of a rifle, followed by the death-cry of an animal and a heavy fall in the bushes—and Blanche Burbank awoke to perfect consciousness, to find the sun shining with dazzling brightness directly into her eyes. She was lying all in a heap at the foot of a steep declivity, her clothes and hands and face covered with sand and dust. She lay between the rocky escarpment and a screen of bushes and interlaced vines, so that she would have been hidden from any one passing quite near; but the blinding sunlight falling upon her face came through a break in the foliage.

For hours she had lain in a swoon, less from the shock of her fall than from the thorough exhaustion resulting from her long tramp through the forest. When she now struggled to her feet, she could scarcely stand. Every muscle in her body seemed a source of torture. Violent activity, followed by long repose in a cramped position and exposure in the damp night-air, had made them stiff and sore.

But a sound of voices reached her from just above her head. Had her captors traced her so soon? With a deathlike faintness of apprehension, she gazed about for some place of concealment. A dark orifice in the rock, within a yard of where she stood, met her eye; and sinking upon her hands and knees, she crept into it. Then she waited breathlessly.

Faintly there came to her a chorus of yells, then the report of a rifle and a woman's piercing scream. It was unmistakable—the shrill, penetrating shriek of agony or terror. She shuddered. What had happened? Had her enemies been attacked in turn by savage foes? Had Mrs. Swanton been shot? She had little cause to love the shrewish wife of William Swanton; but her heart thrilled at the peril of even a foe, and that foe a woman. But, where was her husband and son? Blanche listened for some sound to indicate their presence; but all was still. Yet they could not have been killed outright; for she felt sure that only one rifle had been discharged. Sorely puzzled, yet with her apprehensions but little augmented by the vicinity of savages (for what foes could be more ruthless than those from whom she had just escaped?) she waited.

She could form no estimate of time, in her present state of excitement and suspense. It seemed an age. Then she felt, rather than heard, that something was approaching her place of concealment. Breathlessly she strained her attention. A twig snapped, and there was a slight rustling of leaves.

In panic she crept further into the cave. A little way in, the bottom of the passage became sandy. Suddenly she was startled by a dull, heavy thud directly in front of her. At first, she could scarcely suppress a scream; but a moment's reflection told her that she had displaced some object, and it had fallen to the sandy floor. She reached forth her hand and touched—the stock of a rifle!

"Thank Heaven!" she murmured, with a thrill of satisfaction. "Here is protection, for a time, at least, if only it is loaded."

With trembling fingers she opened the pan, to see if it was primed. It was. But with the discovery came the question, who had left it there? Was the cave tenanted? If so, by whom? She strained her eyes to penetrate the gloom; but all was as dark as Erebus. What terrors might be hidden by that awful night! A sickening sense of loneliness and desolation and peril came over her; and she nearly fainted with dizzy terror.

But a noise at the mouth of the cave thrilled her heart into wild activity. There was a slight rustling of the vines and bushes, then a murmuring sound, mingled with a low sibilation. Presently there was a shuffling noise, as of something dragging itself into the passage.

Had her enemies found her out? Was it Swanton, or the savages? Might it not be some wild beast of the forest? It could not be the bear that had pursued her; he had been shot.

Trembling in every limb, the sorely-beset girl retreated further into the cave. Its unknown terrors must be braved, to escape the certain peril that followed her. She missed the sides of the passage, and knew that she had reached an enlarged subterranean chamber. Here she rose to her feet and made her way over the smooth sandy floor, feeling before her with her foot, lest she should run against something and make a noise which would betray her presence. She reached an abrupt wall, and then turned at bay.

When the shuffling sound ceased, she knew that the object had reached the sand. Then there was an awful pause—a silence that seemed to assume tangibility and envelop her like a dense fog. Presently it began to vibrate. The walls of the cavern caught up the heavy breathing of the object, whatever it was, and flung it back with quivering iteration. The girl could not guess from what direction it came. It seemed all about her. She shrunk against the wall and waited.

Oh, it was horrible, this waiting for the touch of that hideous monster—she knew not what! Perhaps it could see her, itself unseen. Perhaps it was creeping toward her. She shuddered.

Suddenly a flashing eye, it seemed to her excited fancy as big as a dinner-plate, blazed out through the gloom. An agony of terror thrilled through every nerve; a horrible creeping sensation came upon her flesh, and a nauseous loathing took possession of her, as her heated imagination pictured some foul monster like the devil-fish of which she had read. With the faintness of death upon her, she leveled her weapon and fired.

The flaming eye vanished. A sharp cry blended with the deafening detonation that shook the cave. There was a dull thud, as of a body falling in the sand. Then the silence of the grave!

The smoke gradually diffused itself through the chamber. A thin, white curl crept out through the passage, and found its way to the light of day. In there, where no ray of the glad sunshine ever came to dispel the Cimmerian gloom, lay a limp form, the still, white face pressed into the sand, and the now nerveless fingers relaxed from the barrel of a rifle.

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE SIGNAL.

A PARTY of Indians were grouped on the edge of a bit of stony ground, where a woman's trail, which they had been following where the yielding forest loam bore plain impress, disappeared. In their midst, her face clouded with the dejection of hopeless grief, a white woman was seated on a horse. The few days of her captivity had made deeper inroads into her matronly beauty than all the forty years of calm content that had gone before.

At a command of their chief the savages divided into three parties, two skirting the stony ground on opposite sides, while the third, containing the prisoner, remained where they were.

One of the former soon came to an escarpment, and following its verge, were interrupted by a deep growl. The next moment a large black bear made his appearance from the bushes, and seeing the number of his disturbers, was about to beat a prudent retreat, when he was overtaken by a bullet. Enraged at the pain, the animal turned and charged his assailants, but a second shot stretched him in the agonies of death.

Meanwhile, a sound in the direction from which they had come reached the quick ears of the party which had halted on the border of the stony ground. A savage was dispatched to look into its source. Presently he returned; and, at a command from the chief, the party dispersed on either side of the trail. In ten seconds the spot seemed a mid-forest solitude.

Blanche would have been disappointed, had she seen how easily her stratagem was overcome. Swanton was for a moment at fault. Then he passed beyond the second spot of stony ground, and taking one direction himself and letting Sidney take the other, they each made a wide circuit, carefully examining the ground as they went. The first attempt was a failure, but a still wider range on the second trial rewarded them with success.

Scarcely two miles further on they came to a point where the trail they were following was crossed by another, which the renegade had no difficulty in discovering to be Blanche's. And here was the secret of their overtaking her so soon. The circuit which had cost her hours of weary toil, they did not have to go over.

Swanton's knowledge of woodcraft made the whole situation plain to him.

"It must have got cloudy so as to hide the moon," he said; "for she could not have made this first two miles so straight, without using a guide. And see, she discovered her own mistake. Oh, she's a sharp one! Here's where she stopped. Here's where she walked along the first trail to examine it. And here's where she set off on a run. She ought to be the wife of a scout. Demy! I wish I was young myself!"

Mrs. Swanton, who had overheard this remark several times of late, gave a snort of jealous rage.

"Bill Swanton," she said, in a rasping voice, "maybe you think you're the only one what wishes they was young ag'in. I reckon if they was, there's some as wouldn't throw themselves away on no such loafin', trampin'—"

"Shut up, ole woman!" interrupted her husband, lapsing in his anger at her, into the uncouth dialect of the border. "There's injins on this hyer trail, an' if ye don't want yer hair lifted, jest keep that mill-tail o' yourn between yer teeth."

This appeal to the fears of the strew and the pointing out of a moccasined footprint had a marked effect.

"I wish to the Lord, Bill Swanton," she whined, "that I'd never been fool enough to foller such an unconscionable tramp clear out here in this howlin' wilderness, whar—"

"Shut up, will yer! Or do ye want to fetch the hull lot down on us to cret?"

"I move that we back out o' this here job," said Sidney, not a little apprehensive at the evidences of Indians in the vicinity.

"Look a-here," said Swanton, with white rage overspreading his face, "did you swear to stick to this thing, or didn't you?"

"I reckon follerin' this here trail is pokin' our heads into a hornet's nest," replied Sidney, sulkily.

"That's nothing to do with it! Did you swear to foller the thing through?"

"I reckon I didn't swear to foller no trail inter no Sioux embush, not if I knows myself!"

The form of the renegade was trembling with passion, but he held it under restraint while he said:

"Do you think I'm a fool? What 'ud I lead you into ambush fur, say?—tell me that!"

"I reckon this is one o' your blind dogges," said Sidney, after looking at his father a moment in silence.

Swanton's eyes flashed and he set his teeth with a snap. He could ill brook his son's symptoms of rebellion against his will.

"Look a-here, Sidney," he said, "you know me. I reckon in over twenty year you've learnt that I don't take no foolshin' from no livin' man, when I'm in 'arnest. I'm in 'arnest now, an' I say I'm goin' ter foller this trail if it leads straight through brimstone! An' if you crawfish on me now, I'll let daylight through your cowardly carcass, without no more palaver than if you was a dog!"

He threw his rifle forward as he spoke and looked fully capable of carrying out his threat. Had he expressed his thoughts aloud, Sidney would have known why. They ran:

"A life—a whole life of hatred—a life of waiting, waiting, waiting for revenge! and to be thwarted by a boy's whim! Curse him! I'd shoot him, if he was a million times my son!"

Aloud he continued:

"There's monee in this here thing fur you. There's more than money in it fur me! I reckon I ain't fool enough to lose all, by riskin' my scalp in the bargain."

"I reckon you're deeper than me. But I kin stand this as long as you kin."

Sidney yielded with not the best grace in the world; but his father was satisfied. Without a word he turned to follow the trail, only stopping to secure the horses to trees, the rest of the way being made on foot.

They had advanced but a little way, when a rifle-shot resounded through the forest. Almost immediately a second followed. Mrs. Swanton evinced a disposition to whimper; but a black scowl from her husband awed her into silence. The renegade quickened his steps, and Sidney followed in dogged resignation.

Twenty rods further on, and there was a sudden crashing among the bushes, the air rung with fiendish discord, and a score of dusky forms, hideous in paint and feathers leaped into view. Mrs. Swanton's by no means feeble scream was drowned in their deafening uproar.

The usually stolid Sidney was stung into activity. He leaped before his mother and brought his rifle to the shoulder.

"Fool!" cried his father, as he knocked up the weapon, so that it exploded harmlessly in the air.

A tomahawk glanced in the sun, then swept straight for the head of the youth who was rash enough to offer such hopeless resistance. The mother uttered a wild shriek and threw herself upon him, knocking him out of the course of the flying missile, and herself falling over him as he came to his knees, her prompt action perhaps saving his life.

Half a score of knives and tomahawks were on the point of taking their flight from only too willing hands, as many rifles presented their frowning muzzles ominously, when Swanton

raised his hand and uttered a peculiar cry. The effect was electric. Every motion was arrested, as if by magic.

CHAPTER XI.

A SHOT IN THE DARK.

A SERIOUS look was on the face of Burly Ben as the woman's scream died away.

"Somehow, I don't believe they've shot her," he said. "What would they fetch her clear out here for an' then shoot her? No; she's yelled fur somethin' else. Women folks is always skeery, ye know."

A look of faint hope came into the father's face. Eager impatience took the place of disappointment in Hal's countenance.

"Come on!" he cried. "We can't do anything standing here!"

Burly Ben took the lead, and swiftly, yet cautiously, went toward the sound.

They had advanced scarcely a score of rods, when a rifle cracked near at hand, and—"zip! ping!"—a bullet sped by Burly Ben's ear and glanced on a boulder which he was passing.

An involuntary cry escaped the lips of the scout, then his rifle went to his shoulder, and its voice blended with a war-whoop. The call of triumph died away into the death-yell, as a dusky form tossed its arms into the air, and fell heavily among the bushes.

Answering shouts came from no great distance, and the scout turned to fly, followed by his companions.

"Now that they know of our presence, we cannot hope to surprise them," said Mr. Burbank, regretfully.

"We've got to 'come ag'in'!" was the sententious reply of the scout.

Soon they came to a little brook which rippled musically over a pebbly bottom. Ben ran to a flat rock which was washed by the limpid waters.

"Here!" he cried, "hold these things."

He passed his rifle to Hal; then his powder-horn and shot-pouch. Next he stripped off his jerkin in a twinkling, and stepped into the water about ankle-deep with one foot, setting it in a little bed of sand which lay between the rock on which he stood and the pebbly bottom of the stream.

A chorus of yells showed that the savages had found the body of their fallen companion.

"For heaven's sake, let us hasten on," said Hal. "They have struck our trail, and will be down on us in a moment. Shall we wade in the stream?"

He was about to step into the water, when Burly Ben caught hold of him with a cry of warning, and thrust him back.

"Take care!" he cried; "you will spoil everything."

"What is the matter?" asked Hal, impatiently.

"Matter enough! Hyer I'm gittin up a scientific blind, an' you come near knockin' it all in the head," said Ben, spreading his jerkin on the flat rock.

He lifted his foot out of the water, placed it in the center of the jerkin, and wrapping the garment about it, tied it with a thong of leather. His foot had left a plainly visible impression of the yielding sand. Kneeling down on the rock, he smoothed over the impression with his hand.

"Now come on," he said, leading the way directly from the stream, over a strip of rocky soil where their feet left no trail.

Soon the Indians reached the blind, were deceived by it, and scattered; and calls and responses echoed from all parts of the road along the stream.

"Jimminy! but there's a lot on em!" exclaimed Burly Ben. "We can't do nothin' with 'em in the daytime; but we'll have to hunt our holes an' lay low till they give up the s'arch. When they set out ag'in on the tramp, we kin foller 'em, an' take 'em after dark."

"In heaven's name! what is that?" exclaimed Mr. Burbank, as again a shrill scream rent the air. "Hear! It's muffled now! Oh, my child! It must be she! They are killing her!"

Once more the shrieks became shrill and followed each other in rapid succession, again, and again.

"That woman's more skeered than hurt," said Ben, after listening a moment. "I don't believe Miss Blanche 'ud yell like that. But, here's the Injins comin' back. I reckon they want to find out what it means themselves. We've got to git out o' this. Foller me!"

Carefully the scouts picked their way, using every precaution to leave as little trail as possible. Selecting the stony ground in preference to the yielding loam, they presently came to an abrupt escarpment of rock. Suddenly Ben stopped and peered through the bushes and vines that grew against its face.

"Here's jest the place we're lookin' fur, I reckon," he said, with evident satisfaction.

Parting the foliage, he disclosed the mouth of a cave in the rock. Cautiously he stepped through, followed by Mr. Burbank and Hal. When the vines had fallen back to their place, they formed an almost perfect screen, which would hide them from any one passing at a lit-

tle distance. They stood in a space scarcely two feet wide, between the rocky wall and the network of vines.

Burly Ben glanced around with his habitual caution. Suddenly his observant eye was arrested. Stooping, he raised a bit of bruised vine from the ground.

"There's been somebody or something here," he said, "an' not long ago, neither."

"As long as they are gone, now, it serves our turn," said Hal. "Shall we enter the cave and stay till night?"

"They might be in there a-waitin' fur ye," suggested Burly Ben.

At this point, voices above the escarpment caught Ben's ear.

"Anyhow, we can't stay here," he said, apprehensively. "Outside we'll get bagged sure; inside we'll have to risk it."

Without more ado, Ben dropped on his knees and began to enter the passage. He was followed by Mr. Burbank; and Hal came last.

Cautiously they crept into the winding passage, until they were wrapped in Stygian darkness. When, by the abrupt disappearance of the sides of the passage, Burly Ben knew that they had reached the main chamber of the cave, he paused and detached a dark lantern from his belt. They had used it to follow the trail at night. When just inside the mouth of the passage, he had lighted it. Now, holding it at arm's length to one side, to escape the fire of the enemy, if one lay in wait, he drew the slide and flashed a cone of light through the darkness.

Instantly there succeeded a blinding flash, that seemed to fill the cavern with a sheet of flame—a reverberating roar that shook the solid rock—and, with a sharp cry, Mr. Burbank fell against Burly Ben a dead weight, thrusting him forward on his face into the sand, and dashing the lantern from his hand.

"Dig out o' this! dig out o' this, for the love o' God! The squire's killed! Oh, cuss 'em! but they'll pay for this!" cried Burly Ben, spitting the sand out of his mouth; and with Hal's help, he dragged the inanimate form back through the fatal passage, toward the light of day.

"Shot in the head, by mighty!" he said, with almost a sob, as he drew off the bullet-riddled cap.

The hair was all sodden with blood, which dripped, drop by drop, to the floor of the passage.

"He'll never see his darter again, even if we git her. An', oh Lord! what'll Mistress Burbank say?"

And with almost the tenderness of a woman, the rude scout parted the hair with his finger to look at the ghastly wound.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RENEGADE.

It was a weird spectacle—the renegade standing with upraised hand, over his prostrate wife and son; around, like statues of bronze, a score of savages in various attitudes of attack. They stood breathless, as if waiting a repetition of the sound. It came. Then slowly their arms descended to their sides; and, while the rest retained their positions, one whose dress and bearing marked him chief stepped forward, dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, rested his arms across the muzzle, and greeted the renegade with a grunt.

With stupid amazement depicted in his face, Sidney arose and helped his mother to her feet. While he stood gazing from his father to the Indian chief, she clung to him in abject terror.

"Air they goin' ter skulp us, Sidney?" she asked, in a tremulous whisper.

"Shut up, till we see," was the filial response.

The woman complied; but after listening for some time to the conversation between the Indian chief and her husband, not a word of which was intelligible to her, her one anxiety came to the surface again, and she repeated:

"Be they goin' to skulp us?"

"No, I reckon they hain't—not jest yet, anyway."

"Air they afeared o' yer father?"

"I calkerlate as how he's one on 'em. He alers was deep."

"One on 'em! Lud! he ain't a painted Injin!"

"I reckon the ole man 'ud be 'most anything what 'ud serve his turn. Jest look a' that there. I reckon he knows everybody, from the Lord to the devil."

This last remark was elicited by a sudden start of recognition on the part of William Swanton, as the lady captive was led forth from the underwood. Recovering himself, he raised his hat with mock civility and said:

"Ah! can I credit my senses? The gods are indeed propitious. 'Tis years since I have basked in the light of your smiles, madam—the playfellow of my childhood, the inspiration of my youth, my early manhood's devotion!"

At the sound of his voice, while yet he was hidden from view, the lady had started. When she was led forth, she stared at him as if doubting her own vision. But as he addressed her, a great wave of wounded dignity swept over her face; and drawing herself haughtily erect, she began, with flashing eyes:

"Mr. Tra—"

"SILENCE! I beg your pardon!—my name is Swanton—Major Swanton."

The first word had shot forth like a thunder-bolt, making Mrs. Swanton utter a little nervous scream, but not startling the lady captive out of her self-possession, though she paled slightly. Immediately afterward he flowed back into the oily cadence of mock suavity.

The lady's lip curled in contempt.

"I care nothing for your name," she said. "Your treason to your race and your country is apparent in your amity with these ruthless lurchers. It is in accord with your abandonment, years ago, of every principle of right and honor. I make no appeal to your humanity; I do not ask you to protect me against these savages; but your insults to a defenseless woman are wholly gratuitous. At least spare me this. A savage could do no less."

"Insults, madam! How strangely you misconstrue the devotion of one the ardor of whose passion all your years of coldness have failed to abate. Believe me, I would but—"

"Hist!" sibilated Buffalo Horn, the chief, raising his hand warningly.

Instantly every brave was on the alert. Then a bird-call, twice repeated, sounded through the wood. The chief replied by a similar cry; and a moment later an Indian rode forward on horseback.

The lady captive uttered a cry of surprise and pleasure, and the horse bestridden by the newly-arrived bounded to her side with a whinny of glad recognition, and thrust his nose into her hand.

"Selim! Selim!" cried the lady, coddling the horse's head in her arms. "Oh, where is my child, my darling?"

The Indian wrenched the horse away, and the lady turned to the renegade appealingly.

"Mr. Tra—"

"Swanton, madam?"

"Major Swanton, I plead with you for my child's sake when I would not for my own. She has been made a captive, and this Indian who is in possession of her horse must know her whereabouts. Find her and protect her, and I will bless you always! Oh! save her! save her!"

She urged her horse toward Swanton, and extended her hands beseechingly.

A frown of apparent pain knit the brows and compressed the lips of the renegade, and he said, in a voice somewhat broken with emotion:

"Helen, do you plead with me?"

"Yes! yes! Only save my child!" cried the lady, though she winced at the sound of her name on his lips.

"For the sake of old times, I will, if I can," replied Swanton, taking her outstretched hand.

The lady shivered at the contact, and started as if her first impulse were to snatch her hand away; but mastering her repugnance with an effort, she said:

"Will you, indeed?"

"Helen," said Swanton, earnestly, "I never could bear to see you in tears. You wrong me if you think I could carry over any ill-feeling to your innocent child. From this hour I bury all the past. I have been bad. I am still not of the best. But do not you think that I have had time to outlive the folly of my youth? God knows I have suffered enough in these twenty years!"

He seemed to be racked by a sudden spasm of pain. Seizing her hand he addressed her rapidly in French.

"Helen," he said, "in all these years I have never ceased to love you."

"Sir!" she interrupted, in English, shrinking away from him, white with a royal indignation.

"Hush!" he persisted, still in the foreign tongue, "you must listen to me now. I will never address you so again. But you must know that while I have outlived my hatred—for I did hate you, bitterly—I have never for a moment gained the mastery of my love for you."

"Spare your insults, sir," again interrupted the lady, striving to release her hand from his grip.

"No! I protest that it is no insult!" he urged.

"It is the torture of a lifetime that will not be denied expression. There! I am done. Do you think now that I would injure you? I have the power to restore you to your home, and I promise you it shall be done."

He dropped her hand and averted his face, as if in pain.

Was he sincere? The lady looked at him a moment undecided. But the mother's pain drove this speculation from her mind.

"Blanche—my child?" she said. "Is this savage speaking of her? What does he say?"

"That Miss Blanche escaped his party last night, and we are now on her trail," replied Swanton, lying with inimitable grace.

"And you will protect her as soon as she is retaken?"

"To the extent of my power."

At this instant a rifle-shot—the one so nearly fatal to Burly Ben—rang out, at no great distance. Burly Ben's quick return shot and the Indian's death-yell followed; and with a rallying cry, Buffalo Horn bounded in the direction of the affray, followed by all his band.

"Stay here until our return!" commanded Swanton of his son; and he, too, disappeared.

Mrs. Burbank was yet looking after him, not a little agitated by the precipitation of events, when a rasping, high-pitched voice fell upon her ear.

"I say, you brazen-faced hussy!" snarled Mrs. Jerusha Swanton, in a fury of jealous hatred, "who air yeou, anyway? Do you hear?—if yeou try to entice William away from me—my lawfully wedded husband!—I'll pull every spear o' hair out o' yeour head, and leave tokens of my nails in yeour brazen face, yeou piece of impudence, yeou!"

Mrs. Burbank, not a little startled, reined her horse away from the advancing virago. But the filial Sidney checked the threatened attack in a more summary manner. Catching his mother by the hair, he jerked her back and said:

"Shut up, ole woman, or I'll lam yeou to a pummy! Yeou must be a blamed ole fool to think that this lady wants anything o' dad. I reckon she wouldn't wipe her old shoes on him, or yeou either."

"Sidney Swanton!" cried his mother, "yeou're the sassiest, the ongratefulest, the ill-manneredest—"

"Shut up yer yawp, I say, or I'll—"

But he did not conclude; for he was knocked senseless by a stone.

The next instant, without seeing any one, Mrs. Swanton heard a crashing of the bushes at her back; an arm glided about her waist; and a broad, horny palm was pressed over her mouth, not, however, in time to prevent the scream which she sent ringing through the forest. Her unseen assailant soon enveloped her head in her shawl, whirled her round and round, and thrust her with more vigor than ceremony into a bramble-bush. There the terrified woman crouched, screaming with all her might, unheeding the beat of a horse's hoofs in rapid retreat, or the approach of a body of savages.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DASTARDLY DEED.

BURLY BEN started up from his examination of Mr. Burbank's head, with almost a shout of delight.

"Only a scalp wound, blessed be God!" he cried, yet guardedly. "Here, Hal, pass your canteen. We'll have him 'round ag'in in jest no time at all. Chafe his hands, while I dress his head. There's a pair of you, my boy, and 't'll be my turn next."

In a few minutes Carlton Burbank was himself again, the glancing bullet having done less damage than a sharp thwack with a shillelah.

"We must find a more secure place than this," he suggested. "If the Indians should discover our retreat, we would be between two fires."

"We can't go out o' here now, not by no manner o' means," declared Burly Ben, after a reconnaissance at the mouth of the cave. "The woods is chock full o' reds, within stun-throw o' our front-door, an' we'd be gobbled up in a jiffy! An', 'squire," he added, scratching his head, "thar's somethin' quare about that shot. 'Twa'n't an Injin that fired it, ur he'd 'a' yelled, sartin. If it was a white, why then, of course, he's friendly, an' mistook us for inimies."

"In that case, why cannot we make ourselves known, and perhaps gain a valuable accessory?" "That's jest my idee," said Ben. "Anyway, here goes fur a try!"

Followed by Mr. Burbank and Hal, the scout crept back into the passage to the last angle. Here, protected by the jutting rock, he called, guardedly:

"Hallo, in there!"

The hollow echoes of his voice died away among the subterranean galleries; but no further answer was given back.

"Hallo, ag'in!" he repeated. "You needn't be scared of us. We're whites and friends."

Still no answer.

"It's mighty curious!" he mused. "If they was whites, they would be afeared to show their faces, an' if they was Injins, they'd yell, so's to let the outsiders know they'd bagged somethin'. But, hold on! I've got an idee. To git in here, they most likely had to go through this passage; an' if so be they did, they couldn't help leaving a trail on the sand that makes the bottom of this end of it. They can't shoot round a corner; so here goes fur a light. The lantern's in yonder; but I've got my tinder-box, an', Hal, you'll find a pine twig jest at the openin'. Fetch it, while I strike a light."

In thirty seconds a diminutive torch, giving the light of half a dozen candles, was burning. By its light Burly Ben discovered what threw him entirely off his guard, so that he cried aloud:

"Look! look! By the Great Horned Spoon! if here hain't the print of her foot! Oh! glory to God! but we've found her at last! Ha! ha! ha! Now, 'squire, do you see that? and that? and that? Ha! ha! ha! An' it's the only fresh trail—save an' except our own—in the passage; so the girl—God bless her leetle heart and eyes—is alone! Great Caesar! but she nearly killed her own father!"

"What is it, Ben? Is it her trail?" cried the parent, almost beside himself with joy and uncertainty. "Is my child near? Is she safe?"

Heavenly Father, I thank thee!—and yet I scarcely dare hope! Let us go in, Ben! She may be suffering untold terrors, thinking us her ruthless, blood-thirsty foes!"

"Come on!" cried Ben, enthusiastically. "The plucky leetle rat gi'n the Injins the slip, an' then went to pepperin' her ole dad! Ha! ha! ha! He! he! he! Don't salt me, Miss Blanche! Bless her leetle picter! but she does credit to my 'arnin'."

As for Hal, a great wave of crimson swept to the roots of his hair and then receded, leaving him ghastly pale.

"Here's her trail. We can foller that," said Ben. "Hallo! By mighty! Here she is herself, all in a heap!"

With a great cry, the father sprung forward and clasped the unconscious form in his arms.

"Blanche! Blanche! Oh! my child! Awake! arouse! speak to me! Look, Ben, is she dead, or only fainted? Oh, God! if we lose her, after all!"

"It's only a faint, 'squire. She dropped all in a heap after firing that there gun—scart clean out of her wits."

"Thank God! she is alive and safe! Blanche! my darling! my own precious one!"

His tears, his kisses or his impassioned words, or all combined, brought her back to consciousness. She sighed, opened her eyes, gave one mighty start of terror, as if to spring out of his arms, and then recognized him.

"Father! Oh, papa!" she cried, clasped him about the neck, and fainted dead away again.

Burly Ben's skill soon brought her back to consciousness. Then father and daughter enacted a scene of childish delight. They wept, they laughed, they clung to each other in long, breathless embraces; and all the while Blanche overwhelmed her father with a flood of questions, scarcely waiting for an answer to one, in her impatience to put another, or express her delight at their reunion.

"But here are other friends who claim a share of your attention," said her father, presently.

Not until then did Blanche glance over his shoulder, to see by whom he was accompanied. Naturally her eye fell first upon the torch-bearer, Ben. With a glad smile she extended one hand, while the other arm yet lingered about her father's neck.

"Oh, Ben!" she exclaimed, "are you safe? I was so afraid they had captured or killed you!"

"Yes, Miss Blanche, I'm as sound as a nut. But here's another who has claim to your hand before me," said the scout, denying himself the pleasure of clasping her extended hand, while he stepped back and revealed Hal.

"The boy fought bravely for you, as his bandaged head will show," said Mr. Burbank.

"Did you get that wound in my defense, Harry?" asked the girl.

For the time her great joy extended to every one who wore a familiar face. Her smile, in its joyousness and cordiality, was such a one as she had never before accorded him. Hal clasped her hand and touching it with his lips, he said:

"I shall always remember it proudly, since it was got when I thought I was fighting for you. That thought made me disregardful of all danger to myself!"

The touch of his lips thrilled her; and her self-control was not in time to check the involuntary effort to withdraw her hand from his. Nor could any exertion of the will suppress the slight shudder, nor keep the startled look from her eyes. But her tongue was under better command; and she said:

"I will not attempt to thank you; but I will nurse you back to health, when we are safe again."

Burly Ben's turn came next; and now her manner had all the fervor of warm friendship.

"My brave Ben!" she exclaimed, "I am so glad you were not taken or harmed! The cut of your whip would have saved me, had not Selim sprained his knee. Did the Indians get him? It seemed like losing a friend when he fell."

"The Injins did gobble up the hoss; but he hain't fur off, an' I'll git him back if I have to go to the mountains fur him! But how in thunder did you leave the hoss' back without a tumble in the road?—that's what sticks in my crop!"

Briefly Blanche narrated all that had occurred since she had last seen Ben. At the account of Swanton's baseness Burly Ben's wrath exceeded even that of the father—at least in its manifestation.

"And, father, pursued Blanche, "he said that he had known you more than twenty years; and he scowled as if this was more an act of revenge for some past injury, than just to get your money."

"Twenty years?" repeated Mr. Burbank, reflectively. "I didn't know that I had an enemy in the world—certainly none so bitter or of so long standing."

But Hal's lips compressed themselves into a straight line, his brows darkened, and his face grew paler and more resolute.

Then followed the father's story of the sorrow and desolation at home and of the rescue of Mary Edwards. Blanche was quick to express the desire that her sister in suffering be brought

to their present place of refuge. For this purpose Burly Ben and Hal set out at once.

A cautious reconnaissance showed that the Indians had withdrawn from the neighborhood of the cave, called away by an occurrence which will presently be described. Like specters Ben and Hal glided forth, and soon stood beneath the forest trees, the sighing of the wind through whose tops effectually drowned the sound of whispered dialogue.

"Wouldn't it be well for us to learn something about the movements of the enemy before we go for Miss Edwards?" asked Hal.

"A capital idea, boy," responded Ben. "But it won't take two of us to do either job. You go fur the gal, an' I'll scout around a bit an' pick up what I can. We can rendezvous here, an' go to the cave together."

"All right," said Hal, and moved off without further words.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed, when he was alone. "That was done neatly. He saved me the trouble of proposing this very arrangement. That will help to ward off suspicion, if any were possible. And now to cut the Gordian knot! Ugh!" and he shuddered with a horror that blanched cheek and lip, while his eyes, moving furtively from side to side, blazed and his knees trembled with quailing terror. "Great God! it is a horrible deed! But I'll do it! There is no other way out of the accursed trap!"

His features were working spasmodically, his white teeth showing like cruel fangs beneath his mustache, and his brows knit until they met above his nose.

"All for one moment of insane pleasure!" he muttered. "Perdition seize her! I've hated her ever since I got her, and myself too for a cursed idiot! What did I want of this milk and water fool? She promises to spoil everything now. But she shall never live to do it! She is in my path, and must be put out of it!"

At a distance from the clump of bushes in which Mary lay secreted he paused and uttered a peculiar bird-call, which had been their signal at many a happy trysting. With a heart-thrill Mary recognized it, and parting the foliage peered forth from her concealment. Hal saw her and beckoned to her. Joyously she emerged and advanced toward him.

"Oh, Charley!" she murmured in a low tone, as she neared him. "The Indians have been on this very spot. I was so fearful, and waited—"

"For this!"

A knife flashed an instant in the sun. Then the clenched hand of the murderer struck the breast of his victim with a thud. The blade had entered to the hilt.

"HAH!"

A shivering gasp—an awful pause, with horror and, oh! such a world of wondering reproach in her eyes!—a sudden relaxation of the tense muscles, like the dropping of a shadow—and the girl fell backward, with her still, white face and blood-welling bosom crying to Heaven for vengeance!

CHAPTER XIV.

COVERING A BLOODY TRAIL.

THE murderer dropped the reeking weapon and shrunk cowering away, frozen to icy horror by her look, which brought the full realization of his deed. A moment thus, and he recovered himself, with a shuddering, blood-curdling laugh.

"Bah! I am a cowardly fool!" he ejaculated. "It had to be done; and one life is no more sacred than another. The world applauds the killing of a savage or of any other foe. She was a bitter enemy, and could have injured me more than half a dozen Indians. Now, I am free; and I do not repent the deed. No! I would re-enact it a hundred times before she should come between me and Blanche Burbank! There's another who may oppose me there. It will be his turn next! I'm sorry, now, that I did not follow him, and put him out of the way of doing mischief."

Recovering his knife, he thrust it into the ground repeatedly, to remove the blood from its blade. Then he turned to leave her; but, taking a last look, a sudden thought occurred to him.

"Gods! I was near a fatal blunder!" he exclaimed. "An Indian would not leave her scalp!"

He shuddered again at the thought that came into his mind. His ashen face turned to a sickly ghastliness.

"But it must be done," he muttered, communing with himself. "It might lead to suspicion else. I can't risk that."

And yet he shrunk back, his teeth chattering with horror.

"I have caressed it a thousand times; and now—ugh!"

He shuddered so that his knees smote together. All the power of a conscience, made callous by a life of selfishness and debauchery, yet new to crime like this, dissuaded him from the horrible deed he was contemplating; yet his craven soul urged him on. He must secure self at any cost.

"Curse the fate that has plunged me into this hell of horrors!" he ejaculated. "I must take a stimulant to nerve my hand—the hand that has held it up to the sunlight a hundred times!"

He drew the stopper of his canteen, and

with great gulps, trenched upon the scanty store of spirits which had been brought against the probable casualties of their hazardous expedition. The potent liquor fired his blood, until it leaped to his brain in a maddening wave. Then, a long-drawn breath, a fierce setting of the teeth, and he clutched his left hand in her hair. Again the murderous knife flashed in the sun. A swift pass—a horrified averting of the face—a desperate wrench—and he held a reeking scalp!

He dared not look at his mutilated victim, but sped away as if pursued by a legion of haunting ghouls! But soon this paroxysm passed, and he regained self-possession. He had fled with the bloody knife in one hand, and the ghastly trophy clutched in the other. He stopped suddenly, crouching among the bushes, and glancing about as if fearful of some spectator of his infamy.

"This will never do!" he muttered, gazing with a shudder at the evidences of his crime. "I must dispose of this!"—holding the scalp at arm's length. "Great God! it will haunt me to my dying day!"

He hid it in a clump of bushes, covered it with earth, and strewed the earth with leaves. The knife he cleaned as before, and thrust it into his belt. No slight trace of blood about his person would betray him, since gory tokens of the last night's struggle were yet undried.

After that he took another draught at the canteen, and then proceeded slowly toward the place of rendezvous, trying to still the shuddering horror that shook him, and compose his manner to that degree of feeling which might be called up by the cruel death of a helpless stranger who had crossed his path for a moment.

Ben had not yet returned. Hal rested a few moments, and then gave utterance to a shrill, yet plaintive bird-call. It was a cry of distress; and Ben would recognize it as such, were he within earshot. After a pause, Hal repeated the call, and again and again at intervals, until at last it was responded to at a distance.

Presently, there was a stealthy step close at hand; and Burly Ben stood in the presence of the watcher.

"What's awry, Hal, my boy?" he asked; and seeing that the young man was alone—"has anything happened to the gal? You look like a ghost in a play!"

"She's past all help of ours, poor thing!—and she so young and pretty! A million lives could not repay the devilish deeds these fiends commit! Come and see her. It will give you strength to fight for Miss Blanche; for it might have been her, you know."

"So they found her out?—the red devils!"

"No. She seems to have left her hiding-place—I can't guess why."

"And they've killed her?"

"Yes; and scalped her, poor thing!"

"What possessed them, I wonder? If it had been a man, now—but a woman—one would 'a' thought they'd kept her as a prisoner."

"They may have been exasperated at her late rescue; or she may have shown such weakness that they preferred not to bother with her."

"That's like!" muttered Ben. "The blood-thirsty devils never put themselves to much trouble about a prisoner that's the least way cumbersome. A scalp suits 'em about as well as a white squaw, when they can git 'em as handy as they're doin' these days!"

Having made the desired impression on Ben's mind, fitting it to accept the appearance of things without too careful scrutiny, Hal remained silent the rest of the way.

"There she lies," he said, presently, stopping where he could not see her, and averting his face so that Ben could not see its sudden pallor.

Burly Ben took a step forward and stood beside the lifeless form, gazing down upon it with compressed lips and knit brows.

"Such deeds as this don't go unpunished," he said, "but I'm afeared they'll keep on until the last red's rubbed out an' on his way to the Happy Hunting-grounds. She's young an' pretty; but there wa'n't a very chipper look on her face. That waitin', hungry look in her great eyes didn't all come in a day, jest because her folks was killed an' she took pris'ner. This may have put her out of a good deal o' misery, after all. I allow it's a Christian duty to cover her up from the wolves an' bears; an' here's as good a spot as any. Suppose we fall to an' bury her?"

"Not now!—not now!" cried Hal, in great trepidation; for he shuddered at the thought of touching her. Then, noticing that Ben looked over his shoulder in some surprise, he controlled himself and explained: "The danger is too great. We might be interrupted at any moment. We can return, you know, when the savages are gone. Let us—"

The ringing yell caused him to start; and at the sight of a dusky face and tufted head he crouched suddenly, crying:

"Down, Ben! down! They are upon us!"

With an alertness that had become instinctive, the scout ducked his head at the first word of alarm, comprehending the whole situation at once. The whiz of a bullet close above his head showed how opportune had been the movement. Then Hal's rifle spoke, and a dusky form appeared above the bushes, the arms tossed into

the air and the war-whoop dying away in a yell of mortal agony.

But the cry was picked up by ready lungs, until the woods rung again. Fierce eyes gleamed beneath tufted crests, and lithe bodies crashed their way through the undergrowth in hot quest of vengeance.

One moment the scout—erect, defiant—faced the foe, his long rifle tossed into deadly position. A puff of smoke—a sharp report—a savage stumbling to the ground, with a bullet-hole in his forehead, bringing death too swift for even a cry—and Burly Ben sped away, only a pace behind his companion.

"Rendezvous at the same place!" he cried. "An' now each man for himself. We're safest separate. I'm off!"

The men divided the pursuit by separating, each relying upon his own skill and endurance. On and on they sped, exchanging shots now and then with the enemy, then loading as they ran, until the sounds of the chase grew fainter and fainter, finally dying away in the distance, and the spot that witnessed Mary Edwards' tragic death lay again in silence.

Then two men emerged from the bushes; and while one leaned upon his rifle, the other knelt to examine the body.

An hour later Hal dragged himself, nearly exhausted from the hard struggle for life, to the place of rendezvous, and cast himself on the turf at the roots of the oak with a weary sigh.

"Well, boy, air you nigh beat out?" asked a voice which sounded close to his ear, and made him start up and clutch his pistol; for he had lost his rifle in the race for life.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!" laughed the same voice guardedly; and Burly Ben appeared from the other side of the tree, showing signs of his recent struggle, yet ready for another bout.

"Oh, is it you, Ben?" said Hal, sinking back to his position of rest. "A squaw could bag me now, I think. As it was, I only got away with the skin of my teeth."

Lying supine he tossed his arms above his head and closed his eyes, with a luxurious sense of rest and security.

"Young muscles and young wind don't stand the wear an' tear that old ones does, specially if they're shut up in the house too much. But it won't do to lay there. Here's a drop to set you on your feet again; an' then we'll make tracks with the toes p'intin' fur the cave."

Ben offered his own canteen, seeing that Hal's was gone.

"It caught in a bush, and I had to slip out of the strap and keep on for dear life," explained Hal.

"It was a mighty close shave, boy, I reckon. Here's my own reminder."

And the scout laughingly exhibited his cap, where a bullet had passed through it, leaving a hole in front and back.

"Don't feel at all oneasy," he pursued. "You're weak now because o' having lost so much blood last night. But you ain't half so near dead as you look. We'll have you as chipper as a spring chicken in a day or two."

Thus rudely encouraged, Hal got upon his feet, and together they sought the cave, exercising the greatest care to leave no trail. They had nearly reached their destination, when they were startled by the proximity of some one. Quickly they sought cover; but a voice said:

"Hallo, Burly Ben! No dodging in the bush between friends."

The speaker stepped forth, closely followed by another man; and those who had stopped beside Mary Edwards after her abandonment by her false husband, now stood before Burly Ben and Hal.

CHAPTER XV.

A WIFE'S LOYALTY.

AND now will my patient reader recall the opening chapter of our story, where Walter Weston was introduced in a cave passing in review the incidents of his saddened life, drawn thence by the hunter Bantam to follow the trail left by Blanche and her Indian pursuers, after her escape from William Swanton?

We will not weary the reader by recounting their adventures, which have no influence on the main current of events until their movements led them to Mary Edwards, after the treacherous assault of her husband, while Hal was showing her mutilated body to Burly Ben.

Crouching low, Walter and Bantam escaped the notice of the savages. When the space was clear they approached the betrayed wife. To their horror and astonishment the supposed dead woman showed signs of life, and Walter kneeling at her side quickly poured a few drops of liquor between her lips.

The woman moaned and moved uneasily, as if in pain. Then her eyes opened and looked vacantly at Walter. Slowly a look of wonder and reproach came into her face, and her fingers closed tightly over Walter's.

"Charley! Husband!" she said, huskily.

Then with a relieved expression she began again:

"Oh, it was terrible! I thought—"

While speaking she pressed her hand to her bosom. The moisture of the blood which had

welled from her wound attracted her attention. With a start she looked at her hand; then from her blood-stained palm to her ensanguined garments; and lastly with a blank stare of horror into Walter's face, exclaiming:

"It was not a dream then! Oh! how could you?—and I loved you so! Was I in your way? Had you come to hate me so bitterly? Charley! Charley! Oh! oh! oh!"

She fell back, moaning piteously.

"Hush! hush!" said Walter, bewildered by the woman's words, and at a loss what to do for her; only feeling that she ought not to give such violent expression to her grief.

Opening her eyes again, she continued:

"It was a cruel stab; but the wound to my soul was greater than that to my body. I could have borne it from any other hand; but from yours—the hand that I have held to my heart in love!—What had I done to deserve—"

Suddenly the color waved up into her face; and starting up until she was supported by her elbow, and clutching Walter by the sleeve, she demanded, almost fiercely:

"Do you love her—you, my husband? Was it for that, then? Oh God!"

Convulsed by a spasm of physical as well as spiritual pain, she would have fallen back heavily, but that Walter eased her gently to the ground.

"Poor critter!" said Bantam, "she's clean gone out of her head—that's sartin. She thinks you're her husband, an' that you've rubbed her out for some other woman."

"My dear lady," said Walter, gently, "have you been foully dealt with by one who should be your protector? If so, you have found friends who will avenge you, no matter who or what the perpetrator of this deed may be."

At the sound of his voice the woman looked at him with a startled gaze, into which, however, the look of reason had come.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, "you are a stranger to me!"

"We were strangers," said Walter, gravely.

"We are now friends who are ready to avenge you, if necessary."

"Avenge me? For what? What did I say to you? Have I been talking? I was not myself."

The woman spoke disjointedly, in a frightened sort of way.

"You were bewildered by the shock. You took me for your husband," replied Walter.

"My husband? Yes, I was bewildered. But only my husband?—did I call you by name?"

"You called me Charley."

"Charley? Was that all? No other name?"

"Only Charley," said Walter, puzzled.

"Yes, I was not myself. You knew that, did you not? For of course I never saw you before; and had I been myself, I would not have thought you were my husband. But did I talk much? What did I say to you? There is no dependence to be placed upon it, of course. I did not know what I was saying; and I do not know now."

Should he shock her again by telling her? She seemed unconscious of her wounds. While he hesitated she urged him piteously:

"You will not refuse to tell me? I was not myself. I do not know what I said."

She would not be denied, and he told her:

"I gathered from your words that you had been most foully dealt with by your sworn protector—that your husband's hand had done this fiendish work."

"My husband? No! no! he loved me. He would not harm me. It was all untrue. You saw that I was not accountable, did you not? No, my husband left me here, and an Indian—that is to say, he left me at home, and—"

She paused in confusion, flushed painfully, and then went on rapidly, not looking into Walter's eyes:

"I was taken from my home by these terrible savages. Last night I was rescued by a gentleman who had lost his daughter. There were two others with him. They left me in hiding while they went to look for her; but the Indians found me again; and you see—Am I going to die? That is the way it happened. I was not myself when I told you differently. You said yourself, you know, that I was bewildered by the shock. And my head was so numb. I did not know what I was saying. But it was an Indian that did it with a murderous knife."

Her eagerness to impress him with her last-related story was pitiable, and might, by its very excess, have betrayed her, had not Walter's perceptions been dulled by a chill foreboding, which made him heedless of her manner. Passing over all but that which most nearly touched his heart, he asked:

"And this gentleman—did he tell you his name?"

"Yes. It was—Murdock. No; it begins with a B—Burton, I think, or something like that. I don't remember. There is such a numb feeling in my head."

"His daughter—did he speak of her by name?"

Walter's voice was husky. He was pale to the lips, and trembled violently.

"It begins with a B," he kept repeating to himself. Was the terrible blow about to fall?

Could it be that she—she was exposed to the perils of savage captivity? He held his breath while the woman answered:

"He called her Blanche."

"Blanche Burbank?" demanded Walter, in a voice sunk to a whisper.

It thrilled him to the heart, when the woman's face lighted up with recollection, and she replied:

"Yes! Burbank—that was the name."

The man who loved Blanche Burbank with all his soul—who, believing her relations to another made it dishonorable, had striven to crush that love, almost to the crushing of his heart—remained perfectly still, paralyzed by this more terrible blow.

In this condition he saw the woman wince with pain, saw her put her hand to her scalpless head, saw her start with a great gasp, and then stare blankly, as if frozen by some terrible discovery. Presently, she began to pant with a terror which distended her eyes and shook her chilled rigidity into trembling.

Shocked into recovery of himself, Walter Weston drew forward his water canteen, thinking her about to faint. It was of tin, the side worn next his person being polished to a reflecting brilliancy by constant friction against his clothes.

Before he could divine and frustrate her purpose, the woman caught it from his hand and held it up as a mirror.

One glance, and with a shriek of horror she dropped the canteen, and struggled with blind energy to her knees; her wound opened afresh; and she sunk prone upon the ground.

Walter had started to his feet.

"My God!" he exclaimed, with a shudder, and bent over the prostrate woman with an aimless purpose of raising her from the ground.

But a chorus of savage yells replied to her cry.

"Up and away! The devils are right on top of us!" cried Bantam, clutching Walter by the arm and forcibly raising him erect.

"What! and leave this poor creature in such a plight?" exclaimed Walter, all his chivalry in arms. "Never! I'll die beside her first!"

And, throwing his rifle forward, he cocked the weapon, in readiness to receive the foe.

"Fool!" cried Bantam, in the rage of desperation. "Will it do you any good to get butchered over a woman that's already dead, when there's a living one that needs every arm in her defense?"

And the sturdy backwoodsman enforced his words by clutching Walter by the collar of his jerkin and dragging him along, whether or no. But the urging of Blanche's claims settled the matter. Her lover would not have let all the women in the world, living or dead, stand before her.

"I reckon I didn't mean no disrespect," said Bantam, as they tore through the bushes; "but I don't eat my words neither; fur it 'ud 'a' been a blamed fool trick to stand up an' git knocked over by a score o' Soos fur a dead woman."

But Walter needed no mollification for his wounded dignity. His mind was so full of his captive love that he had not heeded the rest of Bantam's speech, and now scarcely heard his qualified apology.

After escaping their pursuers, they returned to the vicinity to look for Mr. Burbank and his party, that they might co-operate with them in their efforts to rescue Blanche from her savage captors.

When they encountered Hall and Burly Ben, as recounted in the preceding chapter, Walter recognized them with a great heart-thrill. Seeing these, her intimate friends, so far from the borders of civilization, made Blanche's perilous situation the more terribly realistic; and, almost choking with emotion, Walter stepped forth and grasped the hand of Burly Ben. Instinctively he shunned the man to whom he was forced to yield up the prize his heart so craved.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHANG.

WILLIAM SWANTON was recalled by his wife's screams, not so much on her account as from anxiety about Mrs. Burbank.

Arriving on the spot, he found his terrified spouse still crouching in the bramble-bush, where she had been unceremoniously thrown. An opening in the folds of the shawl which enveloped her head served the double purpose of admitting air to her lungs and affording exit to the moans to which exhaustion had now reduced the expression of her fright. But the approach of her husband, whom she had no way of distinguishing from an Indian, since she dared not uncover her head, was the occasion of a renewed outburst.

"Oh, Lud! Don't skulp me! I hain't never done nothin' to none o' you! Help, Sidney! Sidney, where be you? Oh dear me suz! what a nateral-born fool I was to come trampin' way out here in the wilderness after that unconscionable scamp Bil' Swanton! O-o-o-oh!"

With no sympathy for her terror, Swanton jerked his wife from the bush with no gentle hand; and she with a vision of imminent "skulping" before her mental eye, treated him to such a clapperclawing as white or savage sel-

dom enjoys! But his profane expostulations were drowned by her screams, no less cat-like than her claws; and before he could rid himself of her nails or make himself known, he was obliged to thrust her from him so that she struck the ground with a concussion that pretty effectually knocked the breath out of her body.

While she lay gasping for breath, he availed himself of the comparative quiet to regale her with a broadside of oaths so familiar to her ears that his identity could not fail to be revealed.

In a moment Jerusha was herself again! Freeing her head from the embarrassment of her shawl, she got upon her feet, terror replaced by outraged fury, and, as she could catch her breath, demanded:

"Bill Swanton—is that you? Oh! you—villainous scallawag! I vum! I'd—like to scratch your eyes out!"

"No doubt, you infernal vixen!" replied her affectionate husband, nursing his hurts; and with a profane invocation he added: "I've a mind to cut a gad and trounce you for the favors I've received as it is!"

"Yeou—take a stick—to me! Bill Swanton, yeou never seen the day that you dast—to raise a finger ag'in' me!"

"Shut up, you confounded old witch, and tell me what has been goin' on here."

"Witch yourself, Bill—Swanton! And I won't—shut up, as long—as I've got the breath—"

"Where is the lady that I left here?"

"What do I know or—care about the tramp-in' baggage that yeou—made love to right before my face an'—eyes? Bill Swanton, I'm your lawfully wedded—wife; an' to hev yeou—Oh! yeou shameful—"

She was adding tears to the rest. That drove her husband to desperation.

"None o' yer whimperin', confound you! or I'll shake the breath out o' your body!" he cried, clutching her shoulder; and, without waiting to see whether she would give further provocation, he carried his threat into execution, shaking her, seemingly, into a somewhat more pliable state of mind; for when he demanded:

"Will you answer me now, you shrew?"

She gasped, submissively enough:

"Yes, William—yes!"

"Very well, then," he said, releasing her shoulder from his grip, "what has happened here, the minute my back was turned?"

"We was pounced upon by a pack o' yeour fine friends, the Injuns; an' no thanks to yeou that we hain't all skulped!" replied his wife, with a slight return to acerbity.

"And what has become of the lady?"

"They've made off with her, I suppose; and I hope they'll burn her at the stake, the hussy!" Jerusha's jealousy flamed up again; and she added, with something of her wonted spirit:

"Bill Swanton, instead o' bein' so anxious about somebody else's wife, it 'ud be more seemly, to my way o' thinkin', if yeou'd show more concern about yeour son, as may be killed, for all yeou know or care."

With the new thought she looked about for Sidney, and discovered him lying unconscious on the ground.

"Oh, Lud! Lud! Lud! If they hain't killed him, sure enough!" she cried, casting herself upon the body with that noisy grief with which death inspires women of her caliber, even for those upon whom they have bestowed little love during life.

But William Swanton gave as little heed to her grief as to her rebuke for his lack of natural affection. A rapidly reiterated cry of distress soon brought a number of redskins to his assistance; and together they set off on the trail of Mr. Burbank's horse, leaving the mother and son to shift for themselves.

While they are in hot pursuit let us take a brief retrospect.

An involuntary cry escaped Mrs. Burbank's lips as she saw Sidney Swanton fall to the ground, stunned by a stone hurled from some unseen hand. The next instant the bushes were torn apart, giving to her view a man unusually uncouth in appearance even for one in his walk of life. He was long and angular—of that description conveyed by the epithet *raw-boned*. His jerkin was too short in the sleeves, and his leggings had evidently not been made to order. For the rest he had high cheek-bones, a remarkably prominent nose, and was decidedly "lattern-jawed," his chin bristling with a few straggling hairs—perhaps a hundred in all—not differing much in color from his shock of yellow hair.

"Don't be afeard o' me, ma'am," he said. "I'm a friend that'll jerk yeou out o' this nest o' rattlesnakes in short meter! 'I am the great Shanghai of the North-west—the cock o' the walk that makes the dirty Soos tremble an' howl when he crows, an' when he flaps his wings in fightin' order thar's work for somebody. I'm about to flap my wings now, madam, fur to git you outen this is the great Shanghai's intentions. So here goes!"

With a bound he leaped astride her horse behind her, and urged the animal forward with hand, heel and voice.

"But, sir, my daughter?" protested the lady, who was being rescued rather against her will.

"I'll save her next, if it pleases the good Lord," said the hunter.

"But William Swanton promised to protect her; and he seems to have power with the Indians," said the lady, her words rendered jerky by the motions of her horse.

"He lied tew ye. I heard 'im. Yeou may depend on it, honest men don't consort with Injins. Oh the iniquity o' the human heart, while men l'arn that the Prince o' Darkness himself ain't painted no blacker nor the human devils one meets among them that sarve him. Now, ma'am, I understand this Sioux lingo, an' yeou don't; an' I heard that snake-in-the-grass tell Buffalo Horn that the gal whose trail the Injins was follerin' had escaped from him."

"My daughter escaped from Major Swanton!" exclaimed the lady. "How is that possible? She was captured by Indians a week ago."

"That may all be, ma'am. But not by those Injins. She was the renegade's captive, though he may have used Injins to git 'er. It wouldn't be the first time by a good many that the thing's been done on the border."

"But with what object? Why should he wish to take my daughter from her home and friends?"

"Revenge," ventured the hunter.

At this the lady was silent, while her mind went back into the past and fixed upon an event which, viewed in this light, drove the color from her cheek.

Her emotion was not lost on her companion.

"Yeou may know, ma'am, whether he ever had any cause to hate yeou or yeourn. He's a black-hearted varlet, an' wouldn't be likely to forgit a grudge, if he had to wait years to pay it off; that's the great Shanghai's guess."

A great awe had come into the lady's voice when she spoke again.

"Sir," she said, "I cannot tell you my past; but it is true that this man once swore to be revenged upon me for a fancied wrong. He was a fierce-tempered man, and far from good; but I never supposed him capable of such iniquity as your words imply. What good can it do him, after all these years, to strile me through my child?"

"Them kind don't look fur the good; but, depend on it, that's what he's up to; I'll agree to have my comb cut if 'tain't."

"And what will become of my child?" asked Mrs. Burbank, an ashen pallor overspreading her face. "Sir, you are the only defender I have at hand, though her father and two friends are somewhere in this great wilderness seeking to rescue her. May I depend upon you? Whatever becomes of me save my child from this awful peril!"

"My life is hern, ma'am, as it is yeourn and every woman's in distress!" said the simple-minded scout, with that grand chivalry which is of no class or condition, but belongs to the stout of heart everywhere, be it king or peasant. "Fee! I've got somethin' o' hern that'll gladden yer mother's eyes, if it don't ease yer heart altogether."

From his jerkin he drew forth a woman's shoe, the sole almost torn from the upper, yet still preserving the delicate symmetry of the foot it had formed to.

The lady received the shoe from his hand, and, while her eyes were dimmed with tears through which she could scarcely distinguish it, pressed the sacred relic to her bosom, and even to her lips, in the fullness of her mother's love.

"Oh, my child! my child! my stolen darling!" she murmured, and then clicked with emotion.

"I found it in the grip of a jagged rock," said the scout, not unmoved by her love and grief.

"And you will save her—save her from them?" cried the mother.

"I'll try, ma'am. Put give me back the shoe. She'll need it, if I find her before them children o' Baal git their clutches on her; an' that I'll do if I git my comb cut an' my wings clipped, you bet!"

With lingering tenderness the mother yielded up her treasure; and, when the scout had replaced it in his jerkin, he said, looking anxiously over his shoulder:

"Ma'am, I'm beginnin' to think that I can't save yeou on this rack-o'-bones. The red devils is pressin' us mighty hard."

The yells of the savages showed that they had indeed gained on the pursued. The dense foliage of the undergrowth intercepted their view; but they had no difficulty in following the broad trail unavoidably left by the fugitives.

"Do not yield me up to them again," pleaded Mrs. Burbank. "I fear that villainous renegade even more than his savage allies."

The scout listened to the scolds of the chase with a painful frown.

"There's but one way," he said, after a pause. "You must hide in the bush, while I lead 'em out o' the way, and then come back fur ye. Do ye see yonder clump? Slip from the saddle, an' lasso yerself in it till I return. Lay perfectly quiet an' yeou'll be safe."

While speaking he reined in the horse, which was laboring painfully under its cumberly burden. Unhesitatingly the lady slipped to the ground and sought the covert he had appointed. A mounted savage burst from the undergrowth on their trail.

He uttered a yell of triumph as he sighted the fugitives; but it was his last; for the scout's rifle belched forth a momentary flash, and the pursuer fell headlong from his horse.

But an answering yell showed that others were at his heels. There was no time to repair the mischief, if danger there were in leaving a dead foe so near the hiding-place of the woman he sought to rescue. She was but a few steps removed, yet so far that he could not recall her and have her mounted again before they would be upon him. He was forced to run the risk of leaving her.

Yet for a moment he paused, struck his elbows against his sides four times repeated, and uttered the ringing note of the chanticleer—
"Oo! oo-oo! oo-oo-o-o!"

Hearing it faint in the distance, Bantam said: "That's Shang's totem! It's not new to the ears o' these red devils; an' they've l'arned to know that one o' 'em's rubbed out every time they hear it."

All through the wood it thrilled savage hearts; and the Sioux brave felt an impulse to feel for the charm his Medicine Man had given him, as the devotee crosses himself to avert the power of witchcraft.

His note of defiance uttered, the scout disappeared in the undergrowth.

CHAPTER XVII.

SIDNEY AROUSED.

It will be remembered that the Indians who skirted the rocky ground in search of Blanche's trail were thrown off the scent by the appearance of the bear which had pursued her on the previous night and lain down at the point where she fell over the embankment. They were recalled by Jerusha's screams when Shang so unceremoniously thrust her into the bramble-bush.

Taking up the trail of the fugitives, we have seen that one of them, better mounted than the rest, came upon Shang at the moment when Mrs. Burbank was going into hiding. Shang's bullet left the Indian with enough life to betray Mrs. Burbank's place of hiding; and Swanton coming up soon afterward, she was handed over to him once more. Looking at him she shuddered. He bowed to her with a look in which triumph, hatred and mock suavity glanced through the thin mask of dissimulation and blended curiously with a look of questioning.

"Helen," he said, "I cannot think that you willingly fled from me as from an enemy. My influence with the Indians is far ampler protection to you than the single arm of a hunter, however well disposed."

The lady shuddered again and covered her face with her hands, but made no reply.

"Humph!" muttered the renegade behind his beard. "A new phase. What has changed my lady's humor?"

Aloud he said, while his eyes contracted speculatively:

"Your daughter, too, who may be taken at any moment—I am surprised that you should abandon her."

At this Mrs. Burbank started to her feet.

"You villain!" she cried, with the air of an outraged empress.

"Ah!" muttered Swanton, watching her.

He removed his hat with a courtly bow, and a sneering devil sat upon his lips as he said:

"Your most humble servitor! May I ask to what I am indebted for so distinguished a mark of your favor as is implied in your very gracious epithet?"

"Tom—"

"Swanton, madam!—Major Swanton, at your service."

"All names are alike to so vile a wretch as you!" cried the lady, wrought beyond self-control. "You, then, are my daughter's abductor, and you lied to me in promising her protection."

"It—your daughter's abductor!" replied the renegade, with a sneering affectation of dismay. "My dear madam, you cannot entertain such a thought! Who has so basely slandered me?—I, who am so wholly devoted to you and yours!"

"You told your vile ally, this Indian chief, that he had escaped from you."

"Ah! did I, indeed?" said Swanton, off-hand. "Well, and do you think it unchristian to lie to these pagans?"

Mrs. Burbank gazed at him in despair. She was saved the trouble of replying by a shrill voice which demanded:

"Bill Swanton, have you brought that creature back again to torment me?"

They had returned to the scene of Mrs. Burbank's attempted rescue. The absurdly-jalous Jerusha was ready to receive them, having restored Sidney to consciousness. Her next words were addressed to Mrs. Burbank.

"You ought to be ashamed to look an honest woman in the face, yeou trampin' bag-gage!—to have a married man a-makin' of love to yeou, an' yeou not a-showin' of him his place!"

The virago was plainly in a hair-pulling mood; but her husband prevented any such demonstration. Clutching her by the arm, while

his eyes, brought close to hers, glazed with a fury that cowed her, he said:

"See here, my love! Will you curb that gentle tongue of yours; or shall I try the efficacy of a gag?"

"I reckon yeou kin say yer say without twistin' my arm off!" was the sulky reply.

"I may twist your pretty neck one of these days!" replied Swanton, in silken tones, as though he were making a love speech.

Then he turned to Mrs. Burbank, and, with a sardonic smile and a suppressed intensity which showed the fierce storm that raged in his breast, said:

"You see my domestic felicity. Even your partiality could not wish me more perfect happiness. To you I am indebted for this!"

Pen cannot describe the intense hate infused into his concluding words. Mrs. Burbank shuddered, thinking that her child might be in this man's power.

"Well, Sidney," added the renegade, in altered tones, "you seem to have come in for your share. What was it this time?"

"A cracked crown in your precious service," replied the youth, a little sullenly.

"Oh, well, there was not much in the crown to spill, I fancy; so there's no harm done," sneered his father. "But, come! I have work for you."

Leaving a sufficient guard to frustrate any new attempt on Shang's part, father and son went in search of Blanche.

Then followed the discovery of Hal and Burly Ben at the side of the foully betrayed wife, and, returning from the fruitless pursuit, the interruption of Walter's interview with Mary Edwards.

Later, a solitary Indian, the one who had ridden Selim into the presence of Mrs. Burbank, entered the glade in which lay the helpless Mary still unconscious. At sight of her he uttered a cry. Clutching her by the arm, he turned her over, so as to see her face. Then a fierce guttural, which may have had something of pain, and certainly had much of fury in it, escaped his lips.

Seating himself beside the unconscious woman, he dipped his finger in her blood, and with it drew lines across his forehead and down his cheeks. Transversely to these he drew other lines with blood-sodden loam. Then he covered his head with his blanket, and rocking his body to and fro, began a weird chant, which now rose to a shrill cry which rung far through the forest and anon sunk to a low wailing sound.

The effect of this strange proceeding was soon apparent. Abandoning the quest of the fugitives, the Indians began to assemble in the glade.

The savage mourner arose, and as each approached, examined his girdle. He was evidently seeking the scalp of the unhappy wife.

"Who has plucked the lily from the heart of the Speaking Rifle?" he chanted. "Who has turned his day into night? Let his blood atone for the deed of his rash hand!"

Mrs. Burbank was spared this scene. Her guards were relieved, and in turn passed the ordeal of examination. When all had come in except Sidney, the search was still fruitless. As unlikely as it was that a white man should have scalped one of his own race, the Indians yet waited.

When they heard him approaching, the suspense was at its climax. Natural instincts, not all dead, prompted William Swanton to interfere in behalf of his son; but reason told him that it was the extreme of improbable that Sidney could have been concerned in the ghastly tragedy, and he remained quiescent.

Sidney started back with dismay and threw forward his rifle, when he saw the blood-smeared chief approaching him with drawn knife.

"Don't be put about by this mummery," called Swanton *pere*. "He's looking for the scalp of this woman, who was his prisoner, it seems, and whom, in all probability, he meant to make his squaw. Of course, you have had nothing to do with her."

Before Sidney could reply, the savage had satisfied himself, and turning from him, went and sat down again by the body, covering his head as before with his blanket, while he resumed his chant in different cadences.

Curiosity taking the place of apprehension, Sidney advanced to see what it all meant. No sooner had his eyes rested on Mary Edwards' face, than his manner underwent a sudden change. With a violent start, he relaxed his hold upon his rifle, letting it fall to the ground. In bewilderment he gazed around upon the grim visages of the assembled savages, and again at the white face of the unconscious.

"Mary! Mary!" he cried, casting himself beside the body.

Her limp hand fell from his nerveless grasp, and still kneeling, he looked up and about him, a stony calm and ghastly pallor on his face. It was the hush before the tempest. Before any one could interfere, a sudden fury blazed in his bloodshot eyes, a cry like that of some enraged beast escaped his lips, and he had clutched the astonished Speaking Rifle by the throat, thrusting him on his back and pinning him to the ground.

"Is this the dog who has slain her?" he de-

manded, addressing no one in particular, and without waiting for a reply, added:

"Die! die, you accursed fiend!"

A momentary hush of dismay, and then a burst of savage yells rent the welkin, while a score of tomahawks gleamed in the sunlight. But the father leaped between his son and this avalanche of death. Flinging aloft his open palm, he uttered that mystic signal which once before had stilled the tempest of savage fury.

At that supreme moment he was conscious of the birth of a new respect for his son.

"By heaven! the boy has mettle in him, after all!" he thought.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE AVENGER OF BLOOD.

SWANTON'S power was sufficient, not only to protect his son from the threatened attack, but to secure the acknowledgment of the superiority of Sidney's claims to Mary over those of the Speaking Rifle, when the former asked to be left alone with his stricken love. After the Indians had withdrawn, Swanton warned his son against the hatred of the chief, whose scowl showed with what ill-grace he accepted his defeat. But, absorbed in his grief, Sidney paid no heed.

Alone with his hapless love, great tears welled into Sidney's eyes and fell upon her face as he pressed his lips to hers, shuddering while he gave the caress.

"Mary! Mary!" he called piteously; and sinking beside her, he held her in his arms.

His head sunk upon her breast, so still—so awfully still by contrast with his, shaken by choking sobs.

Suddenly he starts and gazes wildly in her face. Did he feel her bosom heave with a tremulous sigh?

He begins to pant with excitement. He gathers her close in his embrace, and rising to his knees holds her with her poor head—oh piteous! oh, damnable spectacle—on his shoulder. He rains kisses upon her pale lips—crying dumbly to Heaven for vengeance!—and calls her again, and again, and again.

"Mary! Mary! Speak to me, if only once, to tell me who is your fiendish murderer! Awake, my darling, and help me to avenge you."

Has the passion of a strong spirit power to call back one whose feet are already loved by the silently gliding waters of the Dark River? For see! a tremor runs through her frame; a quivering sigh parts her lips; and her eyes open again upon the sad life so nearly left behind.

She recognizes him, and shrinks closer in his arms.

"Sidney," she whispers, in a voice lighter than the faintest zephyr, "is it you?"

"Ay, love, it is me! Thank God that you know me!" answers her lover, passionately.

The girl shudders from head to foot, and her eyes distend with horrified recollection.

"Do you love me still?" she asks, her voice gaining strength.

He feels her clinging to him, and with swelling heart responds:

"With my whole soul!"

The girl shudders again.

"I am unworthy your love," she says bitterly.

"Hush!" he replies. "You are a hundred times worthier than me."

"No," she persists; "when I should have been true to you I gave my heart to another."

"What?" he cries, sharply.

He would hold her from him that he can gaze into her face, but she clings to him in affright.

"Sidney! Sidney! you said you loved me," she pleads piteously.

"So I do," he says, puzzled by her manner.

"And you—you love me, don't you?"

A look of fierce hate comes into her eyes, as she straightens herself and says, vehemently:

"Yes! I love you from the bottom of my heart!"

He is now bewildered by the inconsistency of her words and manner.

"Why do you look as if you were cursin' me, when you tell me that you love me?" he asks.

"My words were for you—my looks and tone for another," she replies, with suppressed fierceness.

"I don't understand," says the youth, more and more bewildered.

Shivering, the woman shrinks close to his breast. After a pause she says:

"Sidney, you said you loved me."

"I do—I have always loved you."

"And you will continue to love me?"

"Yes."

"No matter what I tell you now?"

"No matter what you tell me."

"Swear it!"

"I do—so help me God! And I'll avenge you too; or die tryin'!"

The girl shudders again, clinging to him convulsively.

"I said I was unworthy of your love," she says, speaking rapidly. "You know that I loved you when we were alone together. I might have gone to my dying day and never known anything different: but when you left me, another came. He was a gentleman in

breeding. He had a tongue of silk and the heart of a devil. He turned my head with his flattery, persuading me that I was a born lady and we were made for each other. And I, like the silly fool I was, believed him, and—will you ever forgive me?—married him!"

Thus far the youth listens to her rapid words in a sort of daze; but when she comes to that fatal word, he thrusts her from him at arm's length, with a cry as if stung.

"Married him!"

Almost fainting, the girl extends her arms to him and cries:

"Sidney! Sidney! you swore that you would continue to love me, no matter what I told you! And have I not paid for my folly? You know that I love you now, a hundred times more than ever before; and as for the wretch who deceived me, I hate him!—I loathe him!—I would shrink from his touch as from the coil of a serpent. I told you that I married him; but I do not know whether I am his wife or not. He did not marry me in his right name, and it may have been a sham all through. But, whether the marriage was legal or not, his villainy since has destroyed every claim on me; and now I know that I never loved him. And when I come back to you, Sidney, do you turn away from me?"

With great sobs he clasps her to his heart, muttering:

"Never, Mary, never!"

Is it strange that the man who yesterday was willing to give her up for an unloving and an unloved bride who would bring him money, to-day esteems her beyond all earthly things? But yesterday they were apart; to-day her living presence appeals to him. He idealizes her, and all his better nature responds to the image his fancy has created. Such is the mysterious influence which woman exercises over man. How often it is wielded for good—how often for evil!

"I bless you, my darling!" says this woman to this man. "I shall not live to enjoy your love; but when I am dead you can avenge my wrongs."

"And I will avenge you!" cried Sidney. "Tell me who the man is that I may tear out his false heart!"

Drawing from her bosom a blood-stained miniature of her false husband, the woman shudders and turns her face away as she hands it to her lover.

"This is his picture," she says. "He does not know that I have it. He lost it, and I found it after he went away."

"It is stained with your heart's blood!" says her lover, fiercely. "I will drown it in his before I am done with him! What is his name?"

"His right name is Harry Bearsley. He pretended to marry me under the name of Charles Morton."

"And then deserted you?—the villain!"

A sharp spasm of pain distorts his face. He cannot help thinking that had she not proved false to her first lover the villainy of the other would have been impotent to harm her.

"Yes," she replies. "It seems he was engaged to an heiress before he knew me."

"And her name?"

"Blanche Burbank."

"What! The girl my father has been figuring for! Why, she is maybe within a mile of us now, somewhere in these woods. She escaped from us last night, and we are now on her trail."

The woman shuddered again.

"Yes," she says; "and it was because I stood between her and him that he murdered me."

"He murdered you?"

"Yes. He, too, is somewhere near us. In company with her father he is seeking to rescue her, and then to make her his wife. Sidney, you swore that you loved me and would avenge me. Now I leave you to hunt the accursed murderer to his death, as he has slain me!"

While speaking she has torn herself from his arms, and now stands erect with hand raised to heaven in tragic denunciation.

The truth bursts upon her lover, and he blurts it out without thinking of the effect upon her.

"He murdered you, and then scalped you so that the Indians would have to shoulder the deed."

An awful horror distends the woman's eyes and thrills her with a mortal shudder. With a gasping cry she tosses her arms above her head and falls backward, the blood gushing from the wound in her bosom.

He springs forward to catch her, but too late. The dull thud with which she strikes the ground shocks him like a blow. Without examination he knows that she is dead.

Then, an awful calm settling down about him, he kneels beside her, and with the blood-stained miniature held between his white face and heaven swears:

"When I forget my mission may God forget me!"

It does not strike him as blasphemous. He has no moral perception whatever. He only sees the murderer and his victim. That sight has transformed him from a youth with rather more of evil than of good in him into an implacable avenger of blood.

But a voice—his father's—raised in a sharp

tone of command, calls him from his ecstasy of hatred.

"Sidney, I want you immediately!"

CHAPTER XIX.

MASKED HEARTS.

We have said that Walter shrunk instinctively from the rival to whom Fate had awarded the prize he so ardently coveted—instinctively, because he himself had never analyzed the repulsion he felt for Hal, ascribing it to an unworthy jealousy. But whether that or a vague perception of Hal's real character, the feeling was too powerful to be mastered; and passing his rival with a formal bow—he could not ask him of the woman over whose fate his heart was so tortured—he grasped Burly Ben's hand and said:

"My dear Ben, as glad as I am to see you, I am pained that it should be under such circumstances."

Here he stopped. He could not bring himself to utter Blanche's name, lest his manner should betray his heart's secret.

"You may well say that, Master Walter," returned Burly Ben, with feeling. "We're in trouble where your arm won't go amiss, nor be given grudgingly, I know. But, how in the world did you happen to run across us? an' how did you come to know o' Miss Blanche's captivity?"

"We were told by the woman whom you rescued from the Indians yesterday, only to be—"

"The woman whom we rescued yesterday!"

It was Hal's voice, raised to a dangerous pitch by excitement. He had returned Walter's bow with one equally formal, with an infusion, however, of hatred and contempt. But when he had heard Walter's reference to Mary Edwards, he started forward with a pallor like death and the eyes of a murderer brought to bay. As if unconsciously, his hand sought the butt of a pistol.

"Hist!" sibilated Burly Ben, in warning, alarmed by Hal's unguarded tones. "What's the matter with you, man? Do ye want to bring the hull kit an' passle of 'em down on us to once?"

Walter turned with a stare of surprise, and then answered with distant deliberation:

"We went to her after you left her for dead—"

"I left her for dead?" again interrupted Hal, almost as unguardedly as before.

"You were driven off by the Indians," replied Walter, not comprehending the true import of Hal's question.

"You went to her afterward, and she was not dead?" pursued Hal, livid and trembling.

Still wondering, Walter replied:

"I succeeded in restoring her to an interval of consciousness."

"And what did she say to you?"

"She told us of her rescue by the party in quest of Miss Burbank, only to be murdered at last."

"Murdered! By whom?"

"Why, by the Indians, of course."

"Oh, certainly! Of course she could not tell one from the other."

Hal made a sickly attempt at a smile as he thus avoided the precipice over which he had so nearly plunged.

"But was that all she said?" he pursued, still on the rack.

"In the first moments of her recovery she spoke of her husband—not very coherently," replied Walter, still blind to anything like suspicion of the truth. How could he connect Blanche Burbank's accepted lover—affianced since babyhood—with Mary Edwards' husband?"

"Her husband?" repeated Hal. "What of him? What did she call him?"

"Charles—or Charley."

"Was that all? No other name?"

"No. She gave but his first name. Now I think of it, she seemed to wish to conceal her surname," said Walter, his words showing how wholly unsuspecting he was.

"Great God!"

The relief was so great that the guilty husband reeled and clutched a sapling for support, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead. Then, conscious of the blank stare of the rest, and feeling that his extreme emotion called for some explanation, he added:

"It was a horrible spectacle! I shall carry it to my dying day!"

The moment Hal ceased to claim his attention Walter began to ply Ben with questions. He was almost dizzy with emotion when he learned that Blanche was secure in a cave under the protection of her father.

What pen can describe his thoughts and feelings when, leaving Bantam to look for Shang, he approached the cave with the other two?

As for Hal, his mind was ill at rest. He longed to know what Mary had said of her husband in what Walter had called the incoherent words of the first moments of her recovery, yet dared not make further inquiry, lest his solicitude should awaken suspicion. He passed in review Walter's and Bantam's looks and manner, until

he shivered with dread that they were holding something in reserve.

"If they have discovered anything, they shall never live to betray me!" he muttered, as he followed Walter and Burly Ben toward the cave.

He shuddered as he reflected on the depth to which he was becoming involved.

"A murder to hide a sham marriage, and two murders to cover the first! Where is it all to end?"

They reached the cave and entered, a signal from Burly Ben warning their friends of their approach.

Shaken by a great surge of emotion, now that he felt himself so near the woman he idolized, Walter allowed the others to precede him, while he sought to command at least outward composure.

The inner cave was dimly illuminated by a torch, no gleam of whose light could reach the outer world through the tortuous entering passage. Mr. Burbank met his friends at the inner mouth of this corridor.

"Ah, Hal and Ben!" he said, giving each a hand, "you don't know how anxiously we have awaited your return, nor how heartily we welcome you safely back! But Miss Edwards? you surely have brought her with you!"

And he peered into the shadows behind them.

Hal seemed overcome with emotion—his friends did not interpret it as guilty fear!

"Oh dear!" said Blanche, with pale lips and clasped hands, "I hope nothing has happened to her."

It was Burly Ben who replied.

"She's past our help, Miss Blanche," he said, gravely. "We kin only feel sorry for her, bein' she was so young an' innocent."

"Not dead!" exclaimed Mr. Burbank.

"Oh, no! no! You mean that she has been recaptured?" said Blanche, hoping against hope. "She's gone whar Injuns kin foller her, but not bring her back," said Ben.

Then Hal found voice.

"The particulars would only be painful to you," he said. "Suffice it that we can be of no further service to her. Meanwhile," he forced himself to add, feeling that it was incumbent upon him, though his whole soul rebelled, "we have run across an old acquaintance, who has kindly volunteered his aid."

This said, he turned so that his face was in shadow, and set himself to watch the meeting between the woman whom he was engaged to marry and the man who might hold the terrible secret of his former marriage and the fiendish deed of blood by which he had removed the obstruction to the second.

Meanwhile Walter has schooled his heart to the trying ordeal which was before him.

"She is another's! She is another's!" he kept repeating to himself. "I have no right to betray my dishonorable passion for her. If I could despoil the rightful possessor, I would be unworthy of her. Oh, God! why am I tortured so!"

But he heard Hal's introduction; heard Mr. Burbank say, inquiringly:

"An old acquaintance?"

And then stepped forth from the shadows of the passage.

"Why, my dear Mr. Weston!" exclaimed Mr. Burbank, seizing upon both his hands, and shaking them with an enthusiastic cordiality which made Walter choke with grateful emotion. "Was ever greater good fortune? But have you sprung up from the earth or dropped from the heavens, that we come across you in the heart of this vast wilderness?"

"I have been making my home with some friends—hunters—and learned of your vicinity," began Walter, when Mr. Burbank interrupted him.

"But here is my daughter, who—thank God!—has just been restored to us from worse than Indian captivity. Blanche, my dear, here is your friend Mr. Weston, whose courage will be no unwelcome acquisition for your future defense."

Her friend! The word thrilled Walter. He had noticed Hal's use of the word acquaintance. A mist swam before his vision, as he looked up to see which term her reception would warrant.

But, Hal's jealous eye had seen what escaped all the others. Upon the appearance of Walter, he had seen her start forward with a quick catching of the breath, a clasping of the hands, and such a glad, radiant smile as could only be called up by a thrill of ecstasy, while a crimson spot glowed in either cheek. A moment it was as if the gate of paradise had been opened to her view; the next it was as if the door had been shut again in her face. Pale to the lips, and with her hand pressed over her heart, she stood fighting hard for composure. When Walter looked up, she was trying to smile an ordinary welcome.

"I need not assure Miss Burbank that I place my life between her and her foes," he said, screening his throbbing heart behind a mask of extreme formality.

His studied manner acted like a tonic; and, with a naturalness she could not otherwise have commanded, she extended her hand, and said:

"You are too good, Mr. Weston. I shall be

at a loss to thank all my friends for the readiness with which they incur danger in defense of so pitiable a burden as myself."

Her apparent freedom from embarrassment, when his very soul was being rent with turbulent emotions, cut him to the heart. He had expected nothing different of her; he had no right to expect anything different (so he told himself) and yet—

The sharp spasm of pain caused his fingers to close over her hand with a grasp that thrilled her. As he bent over that fair hand, only thinking to hide the emotion he could not keep out of his face, he was seized by a mad impulse, born of desperation, to press his lips to it. It was done before he had time to combat the impulse, and he felt a quick start, as if she would have jerked her hand away, and then the hand lay passive in his.

Shocked at his own self-abandonment, he sought to give it another coloring by taking refuge in mock compliment. Dropping her hand, he said:

"We, as your true knights, should not deem your handkerchief or your glove an unworthy object over which to fight to the death."

He saw her smile archly, but did not detect, as Hal did, the nervousness which lay back of it, as she said:

"I see you are not lacking in gallantry of speech."

Then she resorted to her woman's defense, by diverting attention from the dangerous ground on which they were treading.

"It is a thousand pities that your valor was not available for the protection of the poor lady, my sister in peril," she said, gravely.

Hal had seen her start when Walter's lips touched her hand—seen the color flame into her cheeks and redden again, though she raised her hand between her face and the light, under the pretense of adjusting her hat—seen a momentary look in her eyes that would have made Walter's heart leap again—a look which made Hal grin at his teeth and confirmed him in his purpose to murder the man who had inspired it; but his jealous rage was hushed into quiescence by her last words. Here was another opportunity to judge of Walter's knowledge. Hal set his whole soul on the watch, ready to weigh every word and look.

But Mr. Burbank's voice cut off Walter's reply.

"Hark!"

Apparently opposite the very mouth of the cave a chorus of yells broke the stillness.

"By the big horned spoon! we're discovered!" cried Burly Ben, starting to reconnoiter.

And in the danger of the moment Mary Edwards was forgotten.

CHAPTER XX.

A FOOTLESS NEGOTIATION.

ALTHOUGH on the first appearance of the Speaking Rifle, on Selim, Swanton had been so ready with his lie to Mrs. Burbank, the fact was he had paid no attention to what the Indian was saying, and it was not until after the discovery of Mary Edwards that he learned of her rescue by three white men. His curiosity awakened, Swanton questioned the savage, and from his description recognized Mr. Burbank and his party. Hence his excited call to Sidney.

But Sidney had already learned of them from Mary, and readily fell in with his father's plan to take prompt and vigorous measures for their capture.

But Sidney had a plan of his own. Very mysteriously, and refusing to gratify his father's curiosity as to his purpose, he asked for half a dozen Indians to do his bidding without question.

"It doesn't make any difference why," began Sidney, with a dogged determination to have his secret, no matter what the curiosity of the man who had made him act blindly all his life, "but I want these Indians to help me take alive the man I point out to 'em. You kin tell 'em that."

William Swanton regarded his son with a shade of contempt in his contracted eyes. He appreciated the spirit which actuated Sidney, and thought how shallow the boy was in his attempt to baffle his father. Scarcely disguising a sneer, he said, interrogatively:

"Harry Bearsley?"

Sidney's face flushed purple with passion and his eyes gleamed ominously, as he burst forth:

"Yes, Harry Bearsley!—may fiends torture him forever, as I will when I get him in my clutches!"

"Ah!" said Swanton *pere*; and he turned away with a sneering smile.

Thrown off his guard, Sidney had betrayed at least a part of his secret. This was the course of his father's reflections:

"His lady-love tells him of the vicinity of three strangers; and he immediately conceives a deadly hatred of one of the strangers, and devotes him to torment here and hereafter. My pretty Hal has been up to some mischief—that's plain. It's a little odd, though, that those two should be pitted against each other, never

having met. Well, well! man is false and woman faith the world over. Pah!"

And he ground his teeth at some bitter recollection.

It did not occur to him that Hal might be concerned in Mary's death; but he thought that there had been some love passage between them which the girl had betrayed to Sidney in some way—hence his sudden choler.

"An' now," said the renegade, when he had communicated Sidney's wishes to the Indians, "if Carlton Burbank gets that girl away from me now, I'll head a raiding-party that won't stop this side o' the Mississippi. But, curse him! he shan't thwart me! He shall never leave these woods alive!"

In a brief harangue the renegade put the Indians in possession of his plans, and everything was soon arranged for a search which should leave no spot unexamined.

Mrs. Burbank and Jerusha Swanton were left under a guard; and then the various parties disposed through the forest, moving so stealthily that the wilderness seemed a vast, untenanted solitude.

An hour of stillness, and then the woods rung with a triumphant call. Answering shouts came from various directions, to be picked up at points more remote, until they were swallowed up by distance. Then from far and near the tide of savage warriors set toward a center—the mouth of the cave which held our friends—father and daughter locked in each other's embraces; one lover ready to do and die for her dear sake whom he had enshrined in his heart of hearts; the other thinking more of himself, perhaps; lastly the champion and friend who knew no thought of selfish danger, standing guard over the passage through which no savage foe could come save over his dead body.

An Indian, more fortunate than his companions, had espied Walter, Hal and Burly Ben, while on their way to the cave, after they had parted from Bantam. Being alone, he had tracked them quietly, waiting for chance to throw in his way the means of communicating with his friends without startling those of whom he was in pursuit.

A smile of triumph burst over his dusky visage as he saw them part the wires which concealed the mouth of the cave. All fruitless was their careful readjustment which Burly Ben would trust to no other hand than his own. The secret of their retreat was in the possession of the only foe!

When they had disappeared within the cave the savage crept away. Gaining a safe distance he uttered a bird-call. Again and again did he produce the note, until at last it was answered. A moment later he was rapidly detailing his discovery to a party of friends.

No noisy demonstration betokened their fierce exultation. Like specters they glided through the thickets, savage joy gleaming in every eye and pulsing in every heart, but guarded closely by their mute lips.

So they gained the mouth of the cave again. Then, with weapons held in readiness, they voiced their triumph in yells that rose peal on peal.

Each incoming party was informed of the trap in which their quarry was confined; and each gave forth their shout of exultation.

The savage who had made the discovery was called before William Swanton, Buffalo Horn and some of the sub-chiefs. Proudly he advanced and began his story in a vaunting, bombastic style, until cut short by the more business-like renegade.

Swanton plied the savage rapidly with a series of pointed questions which, leaving no room for egotism or Indian metaphor, soon brought him to the end of his information. This the renegade summarized in a single sentence:

"Three men, corresponding in description to Carlton Burbank, Harry Bearsley and Burly Ben, are confined in this cave of which we command the exit!"

William Swanton had fallen into one not unnatural mistake. The savage had described Walter Weston as a young man with a beard; but, informed through Mary of Mr. Burbank's presence in the party, and reflecting that, in the prime of life, he gave little indication of age, Swanton assumed that the Indian had made a mistake in this particular.

"Well," he said, "I've got 'em at last!"

His exultation found expression in a grim smile, as he walked back and forth meditating on his triumph.

"What shall I do with them?" he mused, rubbing his hands with relish.

The savages stood in silence, watching the changing expression of his face. They interpreted the malignant hatred in his scowl, though his words were unintelligible as he muttered:

"Revenge! Revenge!—after a lifetime of waiting! Hal! Carlton Burbank, I have tortures reserved for you keener than any which could be devised by those red devils who are my allies!"

"As for Burly Ben, my hatred does not extend to him; but he shall not live to rise up

against me in the future. I'll give him up to theseimps of Satan as their share. Would just as lieve give him a quick and painless death, as far as I am concerned; but these angels must have their sport; so he'll have to roast."

"And what about Harry Bearsley?"

He reflected silently a moment. Then his brow darkened again, and he muttered:

"He's a fool!"

As if sore perplexed he walked with vision bent upon the ground. His face underwent more changes than while he was passing upon Mr. Burbank or Ben. Finally he came to a standstill with clenched fists, the hard lines of his face expressing iron determination.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed, "he shall bend to my will or—die!"

The battle, whatever it was, was over. He had determined the fate of all three. His face cleared and became merely reflective as he pursued:

"And now, to get them out of this trap alive. Let me see. We might pretend not to have discovered them, and lie in ambush until they venture forth. But no; the Indians have torn away the vines, which is a sufficient interpretation of their yells. We might starve them out. But that would take too long; and they might prefer starvation to slow roasting—the only prospect presented to them, since they know nothing of my presence. Ha! ha! if Carlton Burbank knew me as I am, I fancy he'd as lieve give himself up to Buffalo Horn and his crew as to me."

"There's no use in trying to force our way into the cave. They could butcher us one by one at the other end of the passage. A man with a club could defend such a pass as that."

After a perplexed silence, he brightened suddenly.

"I have it at last," he muttered, with an oath. "After all these years they'll not know my voice. I will pretend to be a white man in power with the Indians and willing to use my influence in their behalf."

Rapidly he communicated his plans to Buffalo Horn, who signified his approval by numerous grunts and the words:

"Good! My brother is as cunning as the fox."

Sidney, too, looked grim satisfaction.

"It takes the trouble of capturin' him off my hands," he said. "An' I don't have to run the risk o' killin' him or gittin' killed myself tryin' to take him alive. Ch! but I'll flay the dog alive! I'll stick splinters in his flesh! I'll grill him on a bed of coals! He shall roar with agony, and curse God and man in his wretchedness! Mary! Mary! you shall be avenged!"

His blood-shot eyes would have dropped tears, but his fury dried them at their source. So writhing in anguish over the wrongs of his heart's mistress and burning with meditated revenge upon her betrayer, he waited.

Meanwhile, William Swanton placed himself at one side of the mouth of the cave, where he could not be seen from within the passage, and called:

"What ho! within the cave!"

He waited, but no response came. Again he called:

"Friends, you are addressed by a man of whom you need have no fear. By saving the life of their chief I have gained influence with the Sioux, by whom you are besieged. If you come forth I guarantee protection, or I will induce the Indians to withdraw and leave you to pursue your way when you choose."

Now, from the hollow corridor came the response:

"Spare your dissimulation. We know you and your villainy. If you want us, come and take us."

"What in the fiend's name!" ejaculated the renegade. "He 'knows me and my villainy!' But I am a stranger to him. That is to say, he cannot identify me with Tom Tracy, dead twenty years ago."

Aloud he began:

"Gentlemen, I assure you—"

"William Swanton, we accept no assurances. We know you to be a renegade and a villain."

"Hal! my name?" muttered Swanton, and aloud, loftily: "Since you know me so well, I demand your surrender."

"And if we refuse?"

"I will give you over to the mercy of my savage allies!"

"Then, sir, hear our decision. Your threat to hand us over to the savages is like the threat of the wild-cat to expose its would-be prey to the fury of the wolf. No, sir; we prefer the ignorant savage to the intelligent devil. We believe that your promises are lies; and we defy you!"

"You refuse, then, to surrender?"

"Most emphatically, yes!"

"The consequences be on your own heads!"

"Do your worst!"

"I give you one more chance."

"Waste no more time or dissimulation. We spin you and your lying pretenses!"

"Are you all agreed?"

"One and all, we defy you!"

"Then, curse you! we'll see who holds the winning hand!"

CHAPTER XXI.

JERUSHA HAS CAUSE FOR JEALOUSY.

WHITE with rage, the renegade addressed Buffalo Horn.

"Chief, we must cut our way in to the dogs! Have you braves who are not afraid of death?"

"Hugh! Better way than that," said the chief. "Smoke em out!"

"By Heaven! that's just the thing!"

In his delight Swanton grasped the dusky hand of the savage, and shook it heartily.

"But, chief, when they try to escape, they must be captured alive—do you hear?—alive! I have an old score to settle."

"No come out alive," said the Indian, again speaking his broken English. "How come through fire?"

"Then let 'em die like dogs in a kennel!" cried the renegade, fiercely. "But he shall not escape me so—after all these years! I'd wring his heart with the knowledge that while he dies, his wife and daughter, more terrible yet, live! Ha! ha! my revenge is sweet! He shall feel his helplessness, knowing that he leaves them to unutterable misery!"

"Ho! I have a glorious plan! I will bring his wife to plead with him! And his daughter—curse these stupid pagans! why have they not found her yet?"

Rapidly he urged the Indian chief to have fagots gathered to pile before the entrance of the cave, and incite his braves to a more careful search for Blanche, while he himself went for Mrs. Burbank.

"Helen," he said to her, "I have a joy in store for you."

The lady looked distrustfully at him.

"You will pardon my frankness, if I say I have little faith in any such prospect coming from you," replied she, bitterly.

"Nevertheless it is true. See how you wrong me. Your husband's at hand, and I would reunite you."

The lady started with sudden pallor. She saw the sneering devil behind the thin mask. Had her husband, following on the trail of his lost child, fallen in the power of the renegade? And did this sinister fiend mean to glut his hatred by gloating on the wretchedness of his victims reunited as prisoners, dependent upon his tender mercies?

At the thought her fortitude forsook her; and bowing her face in her hands, the proud lady struggled with the great sobs that swelled in her bosom, murmuring:

"And our child—our spotless child—will be the next to fall into his hands. O! God protect her! Shall this fiend triumph to the end?"

"She weeps—and before me!" muttered Swanton, viewing with malignant satisfaction the tears force their way through the lady's fingers.

"Come," he said aloud, "you are to be the instrument of your husband's salvation against his own stubborn suspicions."

Mrs. Burbank looked up in surprise. What subtle villainy had this man devised?—for she suspected everything that had its origin in his treacherous brain.

"Your husband, Harry Bearsley and Burly Ben, who came in quest of your daughter, after her capture by the Indians!" sneered the renegade—"you see that I am informed in the matter—are now confined in a cave. If they will surrender I have promised them protection—this in opposition to the wishes of my Indian allies, who are bent upon smoking them out of the cave. I need not tell you that that is a process which means death by suffocation. Will you come and add your arguments to induce them to come out of their own accord and accept my protection?"

"Never!" cried the loyal wife, drawing herself erect. "Did you calculate upon my woman's weakness to betray my loved ones into the hands of so base a wretch, as you? Tom Tracy—"

"Major Swanton, madam!" sneered the renegade.

Not heeding him, she went on without pause: "I know you thoroughly. For once in your life you have made a mistake, which shows that you are wide of the truth in your estimate of me!"

"Not so, my dear madam," said Swanton, coolly. "I am in no degree disappointed by your eloquent refusal to play into my hands—a refusal which, I must say, does credit to your head and heart. But it is a part of my pleasure to make you instrumental in my revenge, whether you will or no. Allow me!"

And with a bow he drew her hand through his arm.

Resistance was useless. Mrs. Burbank submitted with a shudder of loathing at contact with so vile a thing.

But there was another who demanded consideration, urging her wifely rights in no gentle tones.

"Bill Swanton, do you think I'm agoin' to stay here while yeou're off trampin', the Lord knows where, with that brazen piece of impudence, that ought ter slap yer face, instead o' hangin' on yer arm—the huzzy!—in the very face and eyes o' yer lawfully wedded wife! Oh! I'd like to scratch her eyes out, I vum! An' I

don't—see what I—ever—done, to be treated—like this—by—you—oo—oo! I swan to man!—you'd try a—saint!" sobbed Mrs. Swanton.

Stung to the quick, Mrs. Burbank wrenched herself free from her hateful persecutor.

"In heaven's name, sir!" she cried, "if you have a spark of manhood about you, do not again expose me to the vile suspicions of this—this—creature!"

A horrible smile curled the lip of the renegade, as he looked from his lachrymose wife to the outraged lady who repulsed him with such regal indignation.

"What's the use of longer wearing the mask?" he asked himself. "Curse the vixen! does she think I'll let her go on forever tormenting me like this? Her jealousy isn't so unreasonable, so far as I am concerned, but she has a confoundedly ill-bred way of manifesting it."

Aloud he said:

"Why, my dear Helen, any one can see that there's nothing very engaging in that patch of womanhood, while you're a devilish fine specimen of the sex. Aside from its application to you, her jealousy has a most ample foundation; for, to speak plainly, I love you now more than in my unformed youth, when I only half-appreciated—"

"Bill Swanton!" screamed the virago, advancing toward her faithless husband, as if to avenge her wrongs by another application of her nails to his face—"Bill Swanton, do yeou dast to tell another woman, right in my teeth, that yeou're in love with her?"

"Yes, my dear!" answered Swanton, smiling sweetly in the face of his infuriated spouse.

The woman looked at him fixedly, drawing a long, deep breath, and crouching like a very tigress in her rage. Suddenly she uttered a piercing shriek and leaped toward Mrs. Burbank, with blazing eyes and fingers crooked like claws.

Startled so that she could hardly suppress a scream of affright, the lady extended her hands to keep off the vixen's assault. It would have been no barrier, however, to Jerusha Swanton's fury, had not the renegade interfered. One sweep of his vigorous arm, and his wife lay in a heap on the ground, kicking, scratching, biting and shrieking in violent hysterics.

The savages looked on like ebony sphinxes, only the glittering eyes showing the baleful fires within. With them a wife would have had her vixenish propensities—at least so far as their manifestation toward her lord and master were concerned—exercised by a vigorous application of birch, long before they reached such a pitch as was displayed by the contumacious Jerusha. As the case stood, each savage felt provoked to use his tomahawk.

Mrs. Burbank was shocked and disgusted beyond expression. In her case there was another drop of bitterness which a woman could appreciate, and which found expression in the words:

"And to think that the husband of this creature once aspired to my hand!"

There seemed degradation in the fact that the same taste which had selected her had afterward descended to so vile a thing. She might be shocked by this man's villainy—there was no personal sting in that; but in being thus placed on a level or in competition with Jerusha Swanton, her pride and her self-esteem were hurt to the quick.

As for Swanton, his face was black with bitter rage. In that moment his wife's fate was decided.

"Curse her!" he muttered, in his soul, "I have stood this thing long enough!"

Then there was a hard setting of the lips which boded no mercy for the object of his wrath, but outwardly he wore a mask of smiling cynicism.

"Madam," he said, bowing to Mrs. Burbank, "ought not I to be a happy man? one so zealously beloved as I?"

The lady shuddered. He seemed a sneering devil in his ghastly humor.

Again he took her shrinking hand.

"Allow me!" he said, and drew it once more through his arm.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TEST OF LOVE.

WHAT terrible thing had he in store for her? The lady allowed herself to be led away, her heart sinking with cold forebodings. When she saw the brushwood piled high before the face of the escarpment, she pressed her hand over her heart and seemed about to faint; but Swanton stung her back to vivid life by passing his arm about her waist to support her.

"Wretch!" she cried, recoiling from his arm as from the fold of a serpent.

Swanton smiled grimly. His act had been premeditated. He had sought to betray her into an exclamation which should reach the ears of the tenants of the cave, and be recognized by the husband's quick ear. But instinctively she had closed her lips over the cry which rose in her throat, and muffled the sound so that it retained no distinctive quality.

"You are a shrewd one!" mused Swanton. "I scent difficulty in bending you to my purpose."

Aloud he said:

"Carlton Burbank, do you hear me?"

"I care to hear nothing from your foul lips," came the reply from the mouth of the cavern, the voice made so hollow and unnatural by the echoes of the place that perhaps only a wife's instinct could have recognized it. "Spare your proposals. We reject them by anticipation. Let us have acts, not words."

Mrs. Burbank had sunk to her knees, with clasped hands and face like marble. And oh! the mute agony of those tearless eyes!

William Swanton bowed to her, smiling and arching his eyebrows, as again he spoke:

"Carlton Burbank, are you not surprised that I call you by name? Do you know who I am?"

He paused, but there was no reply. With a look of hate which drew up his bearded lip until his teeth showed like fangs, he resumed:

"I am he who was known as Tom Tracy—one who had little cause to love you or Harold Bearsley in those old days. Need I say more?"

There was a pause until every one else despaired of an answer; but, with a grim smile, William Swanton waited patiently till the hollow cavern gave forth the denunciation:

"Tom Tracy, I always knew you for a knave; but I never before supposed you possessed of courage enough to proceed to the length of murder. May I yet live to avenge upon your guilty head the blood of my friend, whom I now believe to have fallen by your treachery!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the renegade. "It is not at all likely that you will ever live to exact so righteous an expiation, friend of my youth. On the other hand, I am come, an instrument in the hands of Satan, perhaps you would say (a convenient cant name for the author of events when they turn out not to our taste!) to call you to account for that act of your life which has won my undying (not grateful) remembrance. And to show that my divinity—Satan, you understand—is in the ascendant, I have only to remark that your gentle wife, my one-time-sweet-heart (destined to be the consolation of my age, as she was the aggravation of my youth!) and your sweet daughter—since it was I, and not the Indians, who captured her tender person—are now here in my power, waiting to take their final leave of you, with your blessing!"

"You lie, you accursed varlet!" came in reverberating thunder tones from the cave.

"Sweet mistress, speak," sneered the renegade, turning to Mrs. Burbank. "Tell your gentle lord that you languish in exile from his fond embrace."

The lady stared at her tormentor in mute horror, with repellent hands and shrinking form.

"Ah! that's your game, is it?" said the renegade; and turning he addressed a few rapid words to the Indians in their tongue.

"Will you speak?" he demanded, turning again to Mrs. Burbank, and grasping her arm.

Her white lips never moved.

With a sudden cry of rage he thrust her from him, raising his hand in the air.

At the signal the savages rushed upon the helpless lady with drawn knives and tomahawks, uttering a single concerted, blood-curdling yell, which rent the silence and then died, like a sudden flash of light.

This device was a second attempt to betray the lady into a scream which should corroborate the statement that she was there. Its failure was even more signal than in the first instance. Mrs. Burbank covered her face with her hands, in expectation of instant annihilation, but uttered no sound. The mute prayer of her heart was:

"Oh God! supplement my woman's weakness, that I may not betray my husband into the hands of his deadly foe through his love for me!"

With an oath Swanton signaled his allies to retire.

The Indians looked puzzled and a little impatient. They did not appreciate the white man's method of breaking a woman's will. Did he not understand the persuasive logic of a fire-brand applied to quivering flesh?

The renegade made one more attempt.

"See!" he cried, seizing a burning brand and holding it over the pile of brushwood which filled the mouth of the cave. "If I light this pile, the fools within the cave die of suffocation, like rats in their hole! Your act shall decide their fate! You shall be their savior or their executioner! Will you give them a chance for life? Will you speak?"

The woman extended her hands and parted her lips, as if to avert the awful danger; the wife was mute!

It was a spectacle weirdly tragic—the woman, kneeling in dumb supplication; the destroyer, with his black form and threatening brand; the circle of savages, with their fierce eyes and half-drawn weapons!—an awful tableau, which lasted but a moment, though it seemed an age. Then with a furious imprecation the renegade hurled his burning torch among the fagots.

"Die a dog's death!" he cried, with a sounding oath; "and with your last gasp reflect that, through your wife and daughter who live—ay! thank the fiend! who live!—my vengeance follows you even after death!"

The welkin was rent by a wild yell from the

Indians; there was the sound of a falling body, as Mrs. Burbank sunk upon her face in a deadly swoon; and then only the crackling of the fagots, as the flames licked them until they burst, giving forth little spirits of steam and smoke.

And while the draught sucked the deadly breath of the fire into the cavern, the destroyer stood with folded arms gazing at it; and his dark frown made more than one savage feel for his amulet and mutter—"Big Medicine!"—his superstition making him dread lest this man possessed the charm of the evil eye.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SMOKED OUT.

AND now let us return to the tenants of the cave.

As the yell which announced that their place of concealment was discovered reached their ears, father and daughter clasped each other in a clinging embrace, the one seeking, the other extending, without thought, that beautiful protection which springs from love as naturally as warmth comes with the sunshine.

Burly Bill crept through the passage to reconnoiter; Hal placed himself at the inner mouth of the corridor in an attitude of defense; but Walter (so truly do our instinctive movements show the heart!) unconsciously drew near the woman of his love, as if he would be the last barrier between her and her foes.

"Papa," whispered the terrified girl, "they have discovered us! Oh! will they tear me from you again?"

"Hush! my child," said the father, holding her trembling form more closely in his arms and touching his lips to her forehead. "We are safe from them here."

"We could defend this passage against an army," said Walter, addressing Blanche in a low tone. He knew that they might have a more impalpable foe than the Indians; but he desired to relieve her until the danger was actually upon them.

"Oh, thank you for that assurance!" she replied, an impulse by what feeling?—extended her hand and laid it on his arm.

The touch thrilled him. He longed to bend and touch that fair hand with his lips. He did not move until she took it away, fearing to precipitate the severance.

Then they remained silent until Burly Ben returned.

"Well?" said Mr. Burbank.

"We're in a trap, an' no mistake," replied Ben, dejectedly.

"But they cannot come in upon us?"

"No."

The monosyllable was like the tolling of a bell. Without understanding its significance, Blanche clung more closely to her father, feeling his kisses on her hair.

Burly Ben stood with bowed head, his hands clasped over the muzzle of the rifle which he knew to be now useless.

Hal was ghastly pale in the torchlight. Was he haunted by visions of that wife with whom he might soon be confronted, under that eye from which no act can be hidden?

Walter stood with averted face. He could not bear to look upon the woman whom even his great love was now powerless to protect.

And so the silence of death fell upon them, to be broken by the rude challenge:

"What, ho! within the cave!"

Blanche started violently.

"Oh, papa!" she whispered, "that is Mr. Swanton's voice!"

"The villain must be in league with the Indians," said Mr. Burbank.

Then came Swanton's offer of protection.

"Do not believe him, papa!" urged Blanche, in terror. "He is utterly faithless. I would rather die than fall again into his power!"

"Have no fear, my daughter. I would as soon think of giving you up to a serpent as to him."

Mr. Burbank held his daughter on his breast with a dull foreboding in his heart that this was the last of their association on earth. His mind reverted to his wife, with whom he had been forced to part even in the first hours of her bereavement, when her daughter's fate was in such terrible suspense. Tenderly he told over those last moments to Blanche, who wept softly, and told him of her own suffering at the thought of how they must grieve for her; then murmured her joy at being once more in his arms; and lastly tried to look hopefully forward to a happy reunion with her mother. But, here the pathos of her struggle against the depressing fear which hung over them like a pall touched the father to the heart; and tears which would not be repressed fell upon her hair with his kisses.

Near the mouth of the corridor sat Burly Ben, with bowed head, giving no outward indication that he heeded what was going on about him; yet he was listening to Blanche's voice, though she spoke so low that he could not distinguish the words, and its pathetic cadences cut him to the soul.

"I'd go out an' let 'em roast me—darn my buttons, if I wouldn't!—if it 'ud save the sweet innocent!" muttered the honest fellow, brushing

the back of his hand across his eyes. "But it wouldn't do no good. After they'd chawed up one—the varmints!—they'd be all the hungrier for the rest."

Harry Bearsley paced the chamber in uncontrollable agitation. At every turn his restless eyes wandered over the other occupants of the cave, but without heeding them. There was a more terrible spectacle which he sought to evade, but which confronted him, look where he might. Everywhere he saw a white face which stared at him in mute, horrified wonder.

"Is vengeance so swift? Must I die before she is cold?" he asked himself, with a shudder. "Great God! is this a foretaste of the tortures of the damned?"

Through all his misery Walter looked in wonder and indignation at the man who went not near his affianced bride at such a moment. Had such been his position—and a thrill of ecstasy and a pang of stinging pain darted through his heart at the thought—he would have been on his knees beside her, joining his consolations and sharing her love with her father. He, like Ben, would gladly have laid down his life for her; but he was denied even that poor privilege. He must wait in utter helplessness for the death which would overtake them all—a bitter task for his young and ardent soul.

"If I could only show her how willingly I would die for her!" he cried, internally.

When Swanton, in ignorance of Blanche's presence in the cave, had declared that she and her mother were in his power, then the rage of the honest scout burst all bounds, and he shouted:

"You lie, you accursed scoundrel!"

But when Swanton was heard addressing Mrs. Burbank with sneering coolness, Blanche turned pale and whispered:

"Papa, can it be possible that mamma is there?"

"No, my child," replied her father. "The fact that he includes you shows that he is lying. And before leaving her I saw your mother in safe hands on her way to St. Paul."

"But let me call to her, papa. If she is there she will surely answer me. And that will settle the matter."

"No. Do not betray your presence with us. It may be better to keep him in ignorance of it, if Walter's friends succeed in rescuing us."

With a sudden lighting up of hope, Blanche turned toward Walter, and extended her hand with an ineffable smile.

"Oh! I had forgotten them!" she exclaimed. "They will do something for us, will they not, Wal—Mr. Weston?"

With the sudden lifting of depressing fear all restraint had been thrown off, and her whole heart had spoken in tones and looks, till she was recalled to herself with a shock, upon being so nearly betrayed into the use of his Christian name, in unconscious imitation of her father. Then a wave of crimson dyed neck and brow, and her eyes fell before the sudden ardor of his gaze, as he caught her hand before it too had time to drop at her side. As it was, the hand rested limp and trembling in a grip which would have hurt her, had not she been too agitated to notice it.

But he had no knowledge whether his touch was gentle or otherwise. His blood was aflame; his head swam with a question which got as far as—"Does she—can she?" and was then swallowed up in a great sea of beatitude in which all coherency was lost. He had a dizzy sense that the words—"My darling!" were trembling on his lips. There is no telling what he might have done, had he not caught sight of Hal, who had stopped in one of his turns, and now stood opposite him regarding him with a broad stare.

The effect was like that of a plunge into ice-water. Walter dropped Blanche's hand, almost staggering under the shock. But, the next instant he was himself again.

"Let us hope that they will aid us in some way," he said, in a voice which was a true lucky. "They both are brave and subtle men, and will do everything that men can do."

Great crises always pass rapidly. The emotions which made up this little by-play came and went like a flash. Following his daughter's address, Mr. Burbank looked up at Walter, over his daughter's head, just too late to catch the young man's wrapt look. He did not see Blanche's blush, because her face was turned away from him toward Walter. Neither did he notice her trembling, until the yell of the Indians in Swanton's second attempt to betray the devoted wife into a scream had suggested a cause which was far from the true one. Then he gathered her more closely in his arms to reassure her, and wholly misinterpreted her hiding her face in his breast.

But the culminating act of the drama was at hand. The baffled renegade hurled the brand into the pile of fagots, and into the cave stalked a cowed and shrouded foe to whose entrance his victims could oppose no barrier, and against whom their weapons were useless.

Burly Ben felt the deadly breath of the fire flend strike his cheek. It roused him into sudden activity.

"It has come at last!" he cried, starting to his

feet. "And what a fool I've been to set here idle all this time! 'Squire Burbank, we've got to git out o' this. Thar must be some other outlet to this here cave—any way, we've got to find one. We can't go out the way we come in; for, not countin' the fire, if a thousand men tried to git out o' there, an' the Injuns wanted to stop 'em, thar wouldn't one on 'em git three feet from the openin'. No more kin we stay in here, unless we're salamanders an' kin breathe fire an' smoke. There's a lot of other passages leadin' from this cave; an' I'm a blamed fool fer not havin' sense enough to try before this if some on 'em don't lead to daylight. There wouldn't be a draught here, if there wasn't some other openin'. It'll be unlucky for us, if it's where we can't git out of it."

"Walter, do you know nothing of these passages?" asked Mr. Burbank. "The cave must be known to your friends, since Blanche found a loaded rifle here."

"Yes, I have been in the cave before; but neither Shang nor Bantam has oversaid anything about the passages leading from this chamber."

"Then let us explore them for ourselves; and that without delay. We have lost golden moments in not thinking of it before."

"I shall never forgive myself," began Walter, flushing deeply at the thought that, while bemoaning the lack of an opportunity to lay his life at the feet of the woman he loved, he had overlooked the most ordinary expedient for her safety.

"Tut! tut!" interrupted Mr. Burbank. "You are no more to blame than the rest of us."

"Ben, we look to your experience to lead us in this matter."

"Well, then, lively! We haven't no time to lose. Light these torches. An' you, sir, stay here with Miss Blanche, while the rest of us hunt for a way out. Keep yer heads below the smoke, if ye have to lay flat on the ground."

Almost in a moment Walter, Hal, and Ben had plunged into the first passage on the left, with lighted torches in their hands.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LIVING TOMB.

WALTER, Hal and Burly Ben had proceeded scarcely fifty paces, when the tortuous passage contracted into a crevice too narrow to be followed further.

"That ends that!" said Ben, and ran back to the main chamber so rapidly that his companions with difficulty kept pace with him, being careful not to extinguish their torches, since re-lighting them would necessitate a greater loss of time than more moderate speed.

Without a word to Mr. Burbank, Ben dove into the next passage on the left of the one they had just penetrated. This ended in an abrupt wall like the inside of a glove-finger.

"We would save time by each taking a passage for examination," suggested Hal.

"No," said Ben; "where Miss Blanche's life is at stake I trust no eyes but my own. Another thing—I'll find work for you soon."

The next passage proved Ben's wisdom. Threading it, they came to a point where it ramified into several branches.

"Stand you here in the passage we've just come through," he said to Walter. "If we lose that, d'ye understand, we might not find our way back to the 'squire and Miss Blanche in a dog's age."

Without another word he plunged into the first branch on the right, followed by Hal. From this they soon emerged.

"Tighter'n a drum!" said Burly Ben, in answer to Walter's look, and dove into the next opening.

This time Walter had to wait longer. The reason was that, coming to a fork in this branch, Ben stationed Hal as he had Walter, and proceeded alone. Reaching a third forking of the passage, he was forced to make his cap do service in lieu of another sentinel.

"How would the lad have managed, had he struck this crab's-leg alone?" muttered Ben, without pause in his rapid examination.

It took a clear head and some experience to examine every nook and corner without loss of time; for the passages were labyrinthine in their intricacy; but this was not the first time Ben had threaded such a maze; and when he emerged from the third passage into the presence of the anxious father and daughter, he would have taken his oath that he had exhausted all its windings.

"No opening yet?" asked Mr. Burbank, delaying him a moment.

"No 'squire."

And Ben disappeared a fourth time.

Now, he moved more rapidly than before. His eyes darted hither and thither with burning anxiety. He had seen that the main chamber was fast filling with smoke; and he knew not how many more rods of passage lay before him ere he found an exit or was forced to abandon the search as hopeless.

"Not a hole big enough for a gopher!" he muttered, as he was met by disappointment after disappointment. "My God! don't let her die here, like a rat in a hole!"

He never thought of himself. He even forgot "Master Hal," in his anxiety for the woman whom he had come to place before all others in the world.

"I've trotted her on my knee, when she was a wee tot that wouldn't fill my cap! An' to have her come to this! No, no; the good Lord can't let her die like this, away from the sunlight, that ain't brighter than her hair! She couldn't

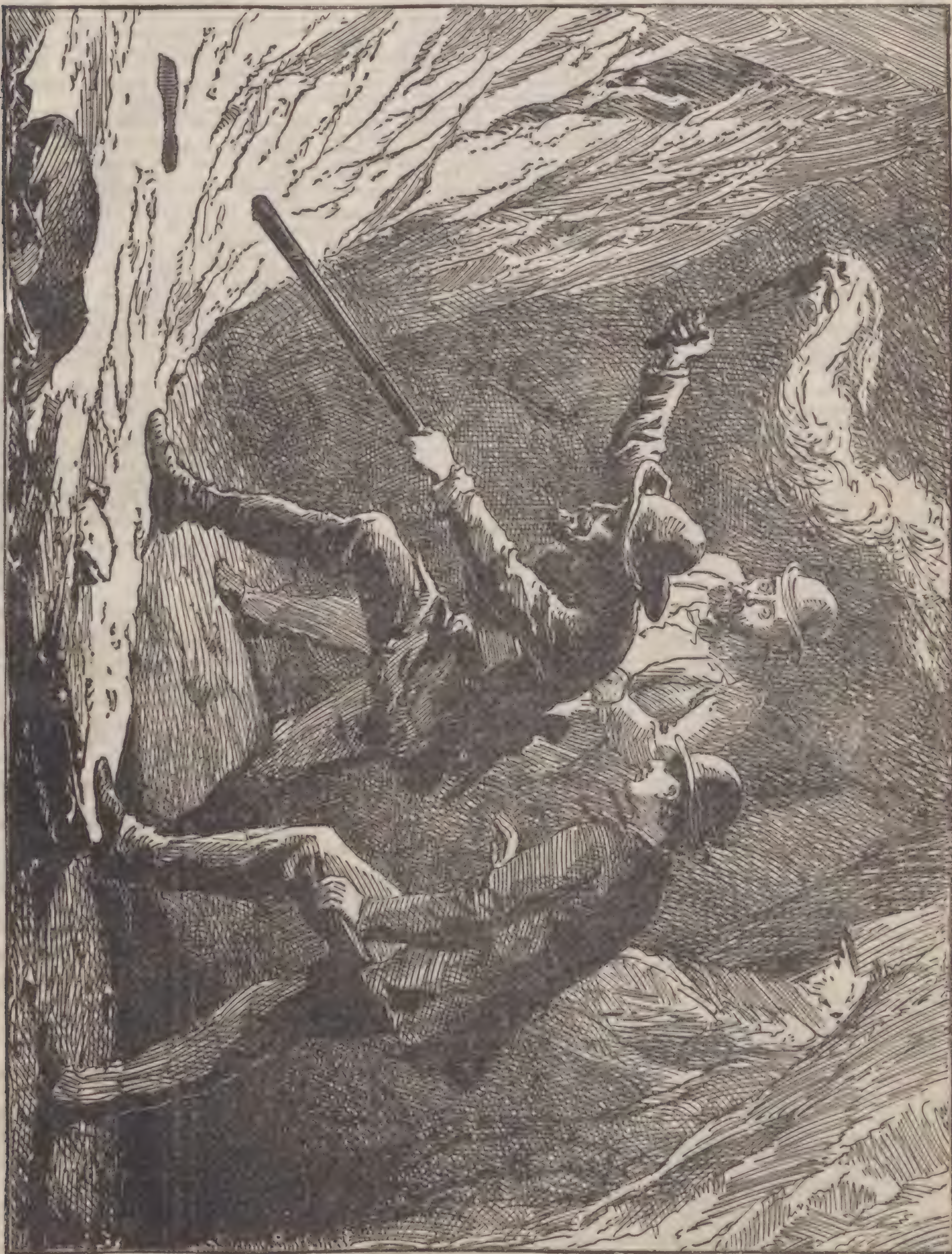
And Walter? But my pen falters. His anguish was locked up by knit brows and tightly compressed lips.

But a change had come over Hal. As wild beasts will bury their natural animosities and affiliate in moments of common danger, so he forgot his hostility to Walter, and sought to relieve the terrors of imminent death by communion with his fellow in peril.

vampire. He scarcely dared look at the father and daughter, still locked in each other's arms. The compressed lips of the one, and the panting terror of the other, cut him to the heart.

And so the heavy moments, that seemed like ages in contrast with the swift-coming death, dragged along. The passages seemed interminable, and their windings seemed the work of some malignant fiend who delighted in holding hope,

LOOK! LOOK! BY THE GREAT HORNED SPOON! IF THERE HAIN'T THE PRINT OF HER FOOT!—Page 2.



rest with never a buttercup or violet on her grave, an' where she couldn't hear the birds sing in the spring time. No, don't let her die here! Take old Burly Ben that kin git along anywhere; but let her sleep out under the trees, where she used to love to set an' listen to my story-tellin'."

Impatiently he dashed the tears from his eyes. He could not indulge them now; they were an impediment to his work.

"Baffled! baffled!" he cried, as each passage disappointed hopes which were no longer hopes. "My God! to be buried alive in this horrible tomb!—to die in perfect health and strength, only for want of air!"

Walter made no reply; but he was terrible in his grim despair, as on each return to the main cave he saw that the pall of smoke was sinking lower and lower, its nether surface oscillating slowly, like the breathing of some horrible

like a fatal mirage, just beyond the grasp of his victims.

And now that silent pall of death, slowly but surely settling down upon them, began to steal along the corridors, so that the searchers were forced to stoop to keep their heads out of its deadly folds. In the main chamber even Blanche, shorter of stature than the rest, could not stand erect without contact with the hideous specter.

Crouching on the floor beside her father, she gazed upon it, watching its subtle approach, inch by inch, with a sort of fascination. And so they waited.

Presently, Burly Ben paused before the mouth of the last corridor. Great beads of sweat stood upon his forehead, and he looked haggard and drooping. In truth, he stood appalled before the terrible issue of this last hope.

A fearful suspense held the others breathless while they watched him. They were all crouching low; yet the amorphous monster had followed them down! down! and in its oscillations, so close above their heads it seemed to reach out its shapeless hands, enveloped in the folds of its shadowy robe, as if impatient to clutch them. It was terrible to see them shrink from its approach, as if it were a living thing!

After a moment's deliberation, Burly Ben turned, and in a voice which startled them all by its unnaturalness, said:

"Squire, you and Miss Blanche might as well come with us now. If this passage leads nowhere, like the rest, there won't be no good of our comin' back to this place."

The brevity of his words, the solemnity of his voice, left them nothing to reply. Silently, almost creeping over the floor to escape the touch of their dreaded foe, they followed him.

"Put out your torches," he said. "We don't want but one now, an' perhaps we can't spare the air they breathe."

That brought the realization of death one step nearer. Had the life-sustaining fluid, so bounteous that they had never given it a serious thought before, now become so precious that they must economize it? Almost unconsciously, Walter found himself trying to do with a little air, that the woman of his love might have more!

But shall we follow them, step by step, while the cold walls confront them on every hand, seeming to mock at their wretchedness, until hope dies out into icy despair, and the amazed soul cries dumbly to heaven:

"My Father, hast thou forgotten me?"

Suffice it, they stood at last in a slightly enlarged space which formed a little chamber at the extreme end of the last corridor. A dark crevice in the roof of the chamber showed where their spirits might pierce to the free air and sunshine of the world above; but here as elsewhere egress was denied to their corporeal parts.

Silently Burly Ben waved his torch above his head. They looked, but asked no question.

Silently he pointed to the corridor through which they had just come. Following them like a serpent, a tongue of smoke crept along the roof of the corridor, and wound its cruel spiral as it began to ascend to the roof of the apartment.

Shuddering, they watched it until, stopped by the vault of the rock, it began to accumulate, and, resuming the form of their old foe, approached again in those hideous oscillations!

"We'll live the longer if we put out this torch," said Ben, with the calm of despair.

"Extinguish it immediately!" exclaimed Hal, starting out of a drooping lethargy into nervous trepidation. "Let us hold on to the last moment! Help must come in some form! Or Swanton may relent!"

Mr. Burbank smiled sadly and bitterly.

"Friends," he said, solemnly, "let us take our final leave of each other. Our last of earth is sad; but what matters it—are we not still in the hands of our Father? Good-by! and may God deal with us all in his infinite mercy!"

He extended a hand to Burly Ben and Walter, who, moved by kindred impulses, bent and kissed it.

"I hope you won't lay it up ag'in' me, 'squire, if I've fell short in anything," said honest Ben. "I've done the best I could, accordin' to my light."

"Ben," said Mr. Burbank, much moved, "you have been more than faithful to me and mine. My thanks—Blanche, thank him for us both!"

"I have not words to thank you, Ben, for all the dangers you have incurred for my sake," said the girl, taking his rough hand between her velvet palms. "Will you let me kiss you?"

The rude son of the forest sobbed aloud, as she slipped her arm about his neck and drew his face down until she could touch her lips to the little spot of unbearded cheek just below his eye.

"God bless you for the angel that you are!" he cried. "If I had a thousand lives, the Injins might roast 'em all out o' me, if it 'u'd only git you out o' this box!"

And now the girl turned slowly toward Walter. Her whole manner changed. The freedom of her intercourse with the hunter was exchanged for shy restraint, which shrugged her shoulders slightly, drooped her head to one side, and bent her form into willowy grace. Every curve was a revelation which would have thrilled an anchorite! Her bosom rose and fell in quick undulations. Her lips were parted by a sigh in which all her soul exhaled to him. Her fluttering heart made the roses play in her fair cheeks, as sunbeams, sifted through moving foliage, flit on the ground. The sweet languor which stole over her showed in the flexure of arm and wrist as she extended her hand to him. Her eyes had sought the ground; but as she felt the clasp of his fingers she raised them to his face,

swimming in crystal tears. She strove to speak, but her tongue failed her. Nothing was lost, however; every fiber of her being spoke with a tongue most eloquent!

To Walter it was as if he were enveloped in a halo of peace. He, too, was dumb. With his great love flowing out to her like a perennial spring, he sunk upon one knee and bent over her cold hand, to warm it with his kisses and lave it with his tears.

No one was witness to this save the God who had attuned their hearts to vibrate in harmony; for Burly Ben was busy struggling with the tears so unaccustomed to his eyes; and Mr. Burbank had turned to address Hal, who was groveling on the floor of the cave in abject despair. "Harry! my schoolmate's son! my son that was to have been!" said the father, tenderly.

That last phrase caused Blanche to start; and, dropping her hand Walter rose to his feet with a gasp, as if an icy hand had gripped his heart.

"Don't! don't! for God's sake!" cried Hal, shuddering and hiding his face more perfectly. "It's wretched enough to have to die like a dog! Let's make an end of it!"

Shocked, yet compassionate, Mr. Burbank started back.

"Harry, good-by!" murmured his affianced, timidly.

But the churl groaned without replying.

"Oh, papa!" whispered the daughter, gliding into her father's extended arms.

"My child! my child!" wept Mr. Burbank, now breaking down.

And clinging to him the girl's heart went forth in a new cry:

"Mamma! mamma! mamma! mamma!"

"Hush! hush, my darling!" sobbed the father, rocking his grief-stricken child on his breast.

"God will comfort her until we meet again! Death is not the greatest misfortune which could have come to us. Our enemy has not triumphed utterly, since he has not succeeded in parting us."

"And now may the God who gave us life with its many blessings take it back to himself, inclining our hearts to bow to his inscrutable wisdom!"

"Amen!" came in solemn response from Walter, supplemented by a groan from Hal.

Mr. Burbank signaled Ben to extinguish the torch.

A moment the scout held it above his head, taking one last look, then dropped it to the floor, and put his foot on it.

"Oh, God!" cried Hal, as he half started up, and then fell back, trying to shut out the specter that looked at him from the darkness with such horrified wonder.

Then the silence was broken only by the breathing of the party and Blanche's low sobs, which the vaulted rocks took up and passed hither and thither fitfully.

But in that almost palpable gloom Walter Weston's soul was flooded with an inward light. Silently he knelt, and, covered by the darkness, took a fold of the dress of the woman he adored and held it to his lips. So light was his touch that even she knew nothing of it.

And so they waited God's summons hence!

CHAPTER XXV.

SHANG TO THE RESCUE.

AND all this while where were Shang and Bantam? Let us answer briefly.

Failing in his search for Shang the bowlegged scout discovered the danger of his newly-formed friends, and would have gone to their relief but that he fell into a perfect hornet's-nest of savages, and was obliged to fly. When he had finally effected his escape, the distance which lay between him and the cave, and the time already consumed, told him that his friends would now be dead by suffocation long before he could hope to reach them.

But another was at work. Shang, returning for Mrs. Burbank, learned of her recapture, and, while looking for an opportunity to make a second attempt, came in sight of the smoke ascending from the mouth of the cave.

"Blest if the children o' Baal hain't smokin' somebody out o' the cave!" he muttered. "Thar hain't nobody but Bantam that knows the secret passage, an' if he ain't with 'em—"

Without finishing the sentence he turned back on his course, retracing his steps with a look of painful anxiety. Gliding by the spot where the Indians kept somewhat disdainful guard over the lackadaisical Jerusha, he passed on round the hill, and soon came to a boulder, which, from its great bulk, seemed immovable to any one-man power.

Is he a Titan, then, that he applies his shoulder with such confidence to the monster? It is a strain for even his schooled muscles; but once started, the boulder rolls so easily over the flat rock on which it rests that we are led to suspect that it has been nicely poised for this very purpose, the more so as in moving it aside it discovers an unsuspected opening in the hillside.

Into this the scout rushed as soon as there was room to squeeze his body through, before the boulder ceased rolling. He had penetrated scarcely two rods of the descending way, when at a turn in the passage he was enveloped in darkness. Here, recollection guiding his hand,

he was soon at work over a rude tinder-box, which consisted of merely a hollow in the rock with the necessary articles for striking a light—flint, steel, and gun-cotton.

It seemed an age before he had a torch burning; but mechanically he paused a moment to put the cover on his tinder-box (a flat rock fitting the hollow) before he rushed headlong down the passage. It ended at a boulder, which seemed to effectually choke the way, only affording passage for smoke serpents which curled upward from several crevices.

"They'll be suffocated, poor devils! wherever they are," muttered the scout, and then he shouted cheerily:

"Courage! courage! comrades! We'll beat the powers o' darkness yet!"

This while he was rushing toward the end of the passage; and no sooner was the boulder reached than his shoulder was against it, with every muscle in play.

The push was even too vigorous, having thrown into it the energy of desperation; for the boulder rolled forward, over-riding an obstruction which was meant to check it, and bumped down into the cave below with a grinding sound which made the blood run cold.

An instant the scout recoiled, as a puff of acrid smoke smote him in the face, rushing on past him up the passage he had opened for it, and making his torch burn dim. Then he leaped boldly down the slight descent into the cave, and fell upon his hands and knees.

There was still a thin stratum of fetid air between the smoke pall and the floor of the cavern. With his head in this he called:

"Ho, comrades! This way to life! Where be ye?"

He was not afraid of being heard on the outside of the cave. The yells of the Indians, who were having a war-dance before the fire which raged at the mouth of the cave, were plainly audible; and he knew that if his voice were heard, it would only make them yell the louder, mistaking it for the cries of their dying victims.

But what made him anxious was, that there was no response within the cave, though he shouted again and again. Were they all dead, or had the Indians been deceived into smoking an empty cave?

He was just about to laugh at this solution, when he discovered on the floor of the cavern, within a few feet of him, tracks which he knew were not his own or Bantam's; and one of them at least could not have been made by Walter.

Drawing several deep breaths, and retaining the last, the scout rose to his feet, and holding the torch near the ground, ran hither and thither about the chamber until satisfied that it was empty. The former tenants must have gone down one of the corridors, in the vain attempt to escape the all-pervading foe. But which had they taken? And, even if he found them, could he hope to drag to life a single one of their number, an unconscious man, through that passage in which he knew there was not one breath of air but that was noxious with rank poison? In any event, he must breathe himself before he proceeded further; and for this purpose he dropped again on his hands and knees—to make a rare discovery!—the print of a delicate shoe, keeping company with the print of an equally delicate foot used!

"By the God of Moses an' of Aaron! I'll save her, if it's in mortal man to do it!" he cried; and springing to his feet again, and keeping his torch close to the trail, he followed it straight to the last corridor.

Having taken insufficient breath, he was obliged to stop half-way down the corridor, where he again called:

"Here I come, lady-bird! Baal, Beelzebub an' Apollyon can't hinder me!"

This time there came a response, and a ringing one too!

"Shang! Hurrah! we're saved!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

A MOMENT more, and the scout staggered into the little chamber, where he found them crouching beneath the smoke pall.

Hal looked haggard and wild-eyed, and held a weapon with which, in his half-delirious terror, he might have taken Shang's life, had not Walter sprung forward and wrested it from him.

"This is our friend," he cried, "come to save us!"

There was no time for explanations now. "Give me the lady-bird!" cried the scout, intent upon the idea which had brought him to them.

"Go on, Shang! We can follow," said Walter, in those quick, firm tones, which carry unconscious command with them.

"All right!" replied Shang, yielding instantly. "Come on!"

Hal had already started in advance of the scout.

A flush of indignation mounted to Walter's cheek at this desertion.

"The poltroon! He's not worthy of her!" was the cry of his soul; and in it he found justification for his next proceeding.

"Let me take her, sir. I am younger and

stronger than you; and she must be carried—her very life demands it!" he said, turning to Mr. Burbank.

Like Shang, the father yielded at once, and without effort. As for the daughter—well, should you expect opposition from her?

Rapidly, Walter explained to her how to take breath; and, timing his own breathing to hers, the instant he saw that she had completed the process he snatched her up in his arms and ran down the passage, preceded by Shang with his torch, and followed by Mr. Burbank, Burly Ben fetching up the rear.

The tax on Walter was much greater than on the others, since he carried a burden; and when he reached the main chamber and sunk upon his knees, even the tainted air, with which the motion of their bodies had mixed altogether too much smoke for health or comfort, was grateful enough to him.

"Take good breath here; for ye don't git no more till ye see daylight!" said Shang. "There hain't a thimbleful of air in the passage leadin' out o' this trap; an' it's longer than the last one."

In a voice so low that it reached no other ears than hers for whom it was intended, Walter said:

"Please do not put your arms about my neck this time—"

The girl started and shrunk from him with a look of keen pain, the rich flush streaming over face and neck.

"Nay! do not misunderstand me," he added, hastily. "You did perfectly right, making it much easier for me to carry you. But, there are new conditions, which make it expedient for us to proceed differently next time. Get in as full a supply of oxygen as you can before we start; and, on your life, do not attempt to breathe until we have reached the pure outside air; nor be surprised at anything I may do to assist you; but give yourself up unreservedly to me."

The stinging sense of shame that she had done something unmaidenly in putting her arms about his neck, and the sickening humiliation of having him ask her not to repeat it, yielded before his tender earnestness; and the painful blush faded, and the tense muscles relaxed, leaving her face softly luminous with a smile of perfect trust, and her posture one of restfulness. Then, too, the possible double meaning—how quick she was to discern it!—of his last words—"give yourself up unreservedly to me!"—sent a little thrill of ecstasy to her heart, which infused into her manner that coy grace which so charmed him.

At this moment, when he was feeling as if he could, single-handed, overthrow all their enemies under the inspiration of that look, Shang, who was near him, said:

"Walter, my boy, you'd better let me carry her the next pull. I'm better able than you; and you've stood one siege already."

Had he been less in love with her, or had she been already his wife—is there any odious parallelism here?—he might have yielded to the evident reason of Shang's words; but, as it was, the egotism of his great love cried out:

"What! let any arms but mine encircle her fair form?—let any breast but mine feel the throbbing of her heart? Never!"

Then, too, the swift glance which darted from her eyes was more than questioning; it was an unconscious protest, which thrilled him without his knowing just why. But neither words nor manner betrayed any emotion as he said simply:

"I am strong enough. Let us lose no more time."

Did Blanche feel a little ashamed that those words had power to quiet her momentary unrest into perfect content?

But his demand for renewed activity was timely; for the vent Shang had opened was fast sucking all the pure air out of the cavern; and they were forced to hold their faces close to the floor to get what little there was left.

"Are you ready?" warned the scout.

"Calmly!" cautioned Walter to his lady-love. "Do not allow yourself to become agitated. You know that I will not stop until you are in safety."

Yes, she "knew" it, or believed it implicitly, which was to the same effect; and she lent him the inspiration of an ineffable look as he gathered her again in his arms.

"Now for it!" cried Shang; and all rose to their feet.

It was a blind rush—that desperate pertinacity with which the soul clings to its tenement of clay when in the very grasp of the Destroyer! But in the sublimity of love—that attribute of our imperfect humanity which lies nearest heaven!—self is sometimes made secondary even in so supreme a moment as this!

They proceeded in the same order as before, Hal being still in advance. Shang watched Walter and his burden with no little anxiety. Burly Ben assisted Mr. Burbank by the arm.

Walter had lifted Blanche so that her shoulder rested against his breast, thus turning her face across in front of him, instead of backward over his shoulder—a rather awkward position in which to carry her, yet suited to his purpose, as the event proved. He had traversed a little

more than half the passage, when he felt her drawing up her hands—an indication that her breath was well-nigh spent. Instantly he pressed his hand over her mouth, which in her present position was within his reach, and stopped her nostrils with his thumb and finger.

The girl sought to shrink from the hand; but it pressed her head firmly down upon his shoulder. She seized the hand with both her own, and sought to pull it away, at first with the strength of decided protest, soon to merge into the frantic energy of determination. He relaxed not a muscle. Then, in the mad fight against suffocation, her whole body began to writhe, and she sought to tear herself from his arms. But he clung to her as if his own life depended upon it, and staggered on up that way of death. Soon her struggles subsided, and he knew that she had fainted.

But his own violent exertions had congested his lungs until it seemed as if his breast were a furnace at white heat. His head seemed about to burst with fullness, the blood throbbing into his brain like the regular stroke of sledge-hammers. His eyes protruded from their sockets and his ears rung with strange noises. A strange numbness seized him, giving him the sensation that his spirit had separated from his body and that his will had no longer any direction over its movements.

"Is this death?" he asked himself; and then: "Will the corridor never end?"

At this point Hal gasped, coughed, staggered and fell to the ground, partially obstructing the passage.

"Look out! Don't stop! It's life and death now!" cried Shang, unselfishly giving some of his precious breath for the salvation of the rest. And with a double purpose—to show his companions the obstruction, and for his own guidance on his intended return—he dropped his torch near the prostrate man.

Reeling blindly along, Walter stumbled over Hal's feet, and would have fallen, but that a nervous arm was thrown about him, and Shang half dragged, half carried him forward.

On ahead a faint illumination showed that they were nearing the mouth of that death-passage at last. But Walter did not see it. He was blind. His head spun round. He lost all consciousness of motion and of his surroundings, until suddenly he seemed plunged into a sea of flame, which slowly his paralyzed senses grew to recognize as God's glad sunshine; and he found himself lying on the ground, with the unconscious Blanche still clasped in his arms, and gasping for breath, which he drank in as in truth the elixir of life.

He did not know that Mr. Burbank and Burly Ben had staggered from the passage to sink exhausted almost at its very mouth; he did not know that Shang, after seeing him safe, had drawn a dozen deep inhalations, and then plunged again into the yawning mouth of death, to emerge shortly with Hal on his back; he only knew that heaven's sweet breath enveloped him and the woman he loved better than himself. But the prayer of thanksgiving froze in his heart as he looked at her. Had his life been preserved, robbed—oh God!—of all its light and beauty and sweetness?

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MAN'S HONOR AND HIS LOVE.

WHAT startled Walter in Blanche's appearance was her face, purple from the effects of suffocation, and the still darker marks left by the close pressure of his hand over her mouth. Was she dead, and—what matter if in the attempt to save her life!—by his hand!

He was spared the agony of seeing her face distorted by terror. The muscles had relaxed, and she lay as if asleep, save for that shocking discoloration.

With a palsied trepidation upon him, setting every nerve and muscle a-quiver, he turned in quest of some means of restoration. Down the face of a rock near at hand, dripped crystal drops of water, like tears, to be collected in a little basin below. From this he scooped the water with his hands; and dashed it in her face. Then he struck her tender palms with his, and, pushing her sleeves back to the elbow, chafed her white arms. As signs of returning animation began to reward his ministrations, the fast-moving tears of joy so blinded his eyes that he could scarcely see the quivering respiration and the slow recession of that terrible purple before an unwonted pallor. But she lived—she lived! and, forgetful of everything else, his tears and kisses fell upon her face.

Was it this that made her open her eyes so suddenly and so wide as to startle him? She did not seem to recognize him at first; but when she did, she clung to his hand and shuddered, and began to sob nervously, like a child who has just awakened from a troubled dream to find itself safe in its mother's arms.

"Do not give way now, after you have been so brave," said Walter, lifting her tenderly, so that she could rest against him. "Thank Heaven! we are all safe!"

"Papa!" was her exclamation, as she feebly essayed to rise.

"Wait! You are not able to go to him yet.

He is yonder, among the rocks; but is reviving, and will join us soon."

Whether from over-solicitude, or in keeping with her needs, he still supported her with his arm, fanning her gently with his hat; and, satisfied with this arrangement, or too weak to make the necessary effort to change it, she yielded, letting her head sink against his shoulder, while her hands hung listlessly in her lap.

Gazing into her face, with its now pale cheeks and closed eyes, it seemed to the lover as if he could sit thus forever. But his bliss was broken in upon in the person of Shang.

"Bless the Lord! the goat that danced before Pharaoh, or Abimelech, or some on 'em," cried the scout, a little uncertain of his biblical reference, "wa'n't no happier 'n I be! So ye're all right, little lady bird? Bless yer bright eyes! you'll be as chipper as a young robin in no time! An' here's yer shoe, that's jest fit for a queen! Scalp me if it's much bigger 'n my thumb!"

He drew the shoe from the breast of his jerk-in, and presented it with a bow which in honest homage need not have shamed the queen to which he had likened her.

Blanche had had some minutes of repose in which to repair her sorely taxed energies; so that on the appearance of the scout she and Walter tacitly agreed that his arm was quite dispensable. She now received her shoe, rather the worse for the rocky grip in which she had been forced to leave it, with a grateful smile that made the honest scout feel "all-overish," as he afterward declared.

With an exclamation of sympathetic pain Walter discovered her unshod foot peeping from beneath her skirts, the stocking torn and blood-stained, where the rocks had lacerated the tender flesh.

"And you bore this so patiently that none of us knew of it!" he said. "Let me prepare a cooling poultice for it at once."

"An', lady-bird, yew won't refuse the softest bandage in my lot?" ventured the scout, drawing a small roll of cloth from a receptacle in his jerkin.

"Shang is a regular old maid," laughed Walter. "He always carries the appointments of a small hospital about his person."

"A proper bandage means a life, sometimes," said the scout. "But, I must go to yer father, an' tell him not to worry about yew; for ye're in good hands an' in good spirits."

Nothing in his look or manner gave outward indication that he saw anything unusual in her relations with Walter; but there was a covert twinkle in his eye as he turned away; and he muttered:

"God bless 'em both! they're a pretty pair! I'll not worry any on 'em by lettin' on that her mother's in the hands o' the enemy, until we git this one safe. It'll be time enough then."

Walter returned from his quest of healing leaves to find that Blanche had removed her stocking during his brief absence. He was charmed with the waxen beauty of her foot, with its blue veins and pink nails, and its symmetry like chiseled marble. Tenderly he bathed it, with so reverent a touch that she looked at him as only a woman can look at a man who does such homage to her womanhood. Bruising the leaves between two flat stones, he spread them one by one over the wounds and bound them firmly, securing them with pins with which she supplied him. Then he withdrew to a little distance, to enable her to complete her toilet without embarrassment.

"Your poultice is delightfully cooling," she said, a moment later; "and your work is so nicely done that I found little inconvenience in putting on my shoe. Will you accept my thanks, and take me to papa?"

He assisted her to rise, and would still have extended to her the support of an encircling arm; but, looking up into his face, she said:

"If you will let me take your arm, I think I can walk nicely."

Something in her look took away most of the sting of this slight rebuff; yet he could not wholly repress a look of chagrin, as he bowed to her will.

So, limping slightly, she went to her father, to twine her arms about his neck with a gush of love that made Walter shiver, thinking that what his soul craved with such famished appetite would be forever denied him.

While alone with her, he had almost forgotten Hal's existence; but, once more in the presence of her affianced husband, his dream of bliss was shattered, and he was overcome by a sense of having wronged this man; for the jewel was his, no matter how unworthily he held it.

This introduced another and even more bitter reflection. To him betrothal had much the sanctity of marriage. What then could be said of his having kissed her while she was unconscious and could not refuse him? Had he taken a dastardly advantage of her helplessness? Had he betrayed her confidence and friendship? Where was his fine sense of honor, where was that reverence due to all women—not to mention the one woman of all the world most sacred—that he could so forget himself?

His spirit was humbled to the dust; and he turned away to hide his emotion.

But was there no way to make atonement!

Yes. Henceforth he must treat her, not as a sister—such a relation had too much of familiarity in it—but as a goddess, not to be approached with unwashed hands. He would watch over her, protecting her from outward dangers; but first of all he must protect her from himself.

As some reparation to Hal, he approached and asked if he could do anything to make him more comfortable. Hal, who under Burly Ben's care was in a fair way to be soon in possession of his wonted strength, looked up and replied, with the forms of courtesy, but with an undercurrent of sarcasm:

"No, I thank you. You have already been only too kind in your services to my future wife, which I of course regard and will, if opportunity offers, requite as a personal obligation."

"I beg that you will not consider the matter in that light," replied Walter, stung by the covert insolence of the other's words. "If what little I have done is honored by a place in the remembrance of the lady herself, I shall feel more than repaid."

With a bow he turned away, his anger striving in vain to drown a voice which asked:

"What right have you to complain? Is it not a meet reward for your treachery?"

Harry Bearsley looked after the retreating figure with gleaming eyes.

"Don't think but it will be honored by a place in my remembrance!" he hissed, beneath his breath. "When your blood has paid for it, I may forget it, along with yourself; but not before!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HIDING.

MEANWHILE Shang had begun to manifest increasing signs of anxiety.

"Friends," he said, "I don't want to hurry nobody; but this hain't the safest place in the world; an' it's my opinion we'd better be gittin' out of it as soon's ye're able to move. The Philistines are a mighty uneasy set; an' if they took a notion to ramble around here, they might light onto us all of a sudden."

"I reckon some on us hain't got much stomach for trampin' through the brush," said Burly Ben. "Now how long might it be, Mrs. Blanche, since you've had anything to eat?"

"Not since last night," replied the girl, who until now had not realized that much of her weakness was due to hunger.

Since her escape from William Swanton there had been scarcely a moment, except during her long swoon, which was not filled with its absorbing interest, so that the ordinary demands of the body had not made themselves heard, though the day was now far advanced. But at the first suggestion hunger assailed her with ravenous impetuosity, so that she looked from one to the other of her friends for something with which to gratify its cravings.

"I will go to our cave and fetch something immediately," said Walter, and was about to move off without further delay.

"Hold on," interposed Shang. "This hain't no dinin'-room. I lose my guess, if the whole kit don't want somethin' in the shape o' fodder. So I say we'd better all go where it is, an' where the Arabs o' the desert won't 'light down on us about the time we git the feast spread, an' glut their heathen appetites with Christian provender—along with our scalps, perhaps. But first ye all want to be freshened up a bit; for there's no knowin' how much fightin' an' scamperin' we may have to do before we git to cover. Has anybody got any corn-juice? That'll always give nerve in a pinch, though somethin' solidier an' not so fiery is better for ordinary occasions."

"Hal, you have a canteen," said Mr. Burbank.

Hal shuddered. The recollection rushed upon him that he had emptied his canteen to nerve himself for the murder of Mary Edwards, and then thrown the canteen away in anticipation of some such occasion as this when it would be difficult to account for the disappearance of the liquor. He now made the explanation he had prepared.

"The strap of my canteen caught in a bush, this morning, while Ben and I were being pursued; and I was forced to slip out of it to save myself from capture."

"My flask is at your service," said Walter, handing it, not to Blanche, but to her father.

This was a part of his atonement. He tried to steel his heart against the look which flashed from the girl's eyes as she received the flask from her father's hand. He was famishing for the slightest crumb of approval from her; yet he told himself that he had no right to her gratitude. If she knew all, would she not despise him and shun his gifts? This thought gave him a dreary look into the future. That stolen rapture of touching her lips must now forever stand between them. Her friendship, her merest smile, must in the future be received by him under false pretenses.

"An' this brings us to another consideration," said Shang, his words flowing, not from Walter's, but from his own line of thought. How many

of us has got anything to fight with, if we have to fight?"

Fortunately, Walter's rifle had been slung to his back with a strap, which enabled him to retain it while carrying Blanche. For Burly Ben to have parted with his weapon before he had parted with his life, was not a supposable case. It was more a matter for congratulation that Mr. Burbank had kept his during that mad race with death; but he had clung to it mechanically, as people sometimes carry even useless things through the greatest dangers. Hal alone had lost his chief weapon; his lay in the corridor where he had fallen senseless.

Shang made one more entrance into the smoke-filled passage, as far as the first angle, whence he brought forth his own trusty rifle and another, which he presented to Hal, saying that it had belonged to an Indian "who had no further use for it!"

It had occurred to Walter that, in view of the feeling between them, Hal might refuse to be benefited by the use of his canteen, if obliged to accept it in his presence; and not wishing to place him between the alternatives of humiliation and suffering, he had, with rare tact, drawn a little apart from the others, when he was suddenly startled by seeing a bush in motion at no great distance. With his rifle in readiness, he bounded toward it. Then, from the coppice, arose a dusky form, with a tomahawk poised in air.

Walter knew that the sound of his rifle would betray the presence of his friends; but the Indian's yell would do it in any event: so he fired, and then dodged the coming missile. The yell of the savage was cut in the middle, as his body disappeared in the foliage.

With rapid bounds, Walter regained his friends, to find Hal with the flask to his mouth. Even in such a moment Hal found expression for his hatred. He handed Walter the flask with a mock bow of acknowledgment. His smile, too, was full of meaning, as he turned and took Blanche by the arm.

Walter received the flask mechanically, standing stock-still and staring blankly for a single instant. The whole proceeding was like a slap in the face. His mind and heart had been full of but one thought—"my darling!"—when this Mephistophiles had stepped between them and said—"MINE!" He felt an icy shiver run over him, and his eyes fell to the ground, so that he failed to see Blanche look past Hal to him.

But the glance was not lost on Hal, who ground his teeth with internal rage, thinking:

"You jadel I'll put you in training when the law has placed you in my power! You'll not then make love before my face, I promise you!"

Hal was no coward now, when the danger was one which he was accustomed to meet. In the broad sunlight, Mary's ghost had not the power to haunt him; so there was no excuse for his now shirking his duty of protection to his affianced wife.

With the yells of an approaching party of savages ringing in her ears, Blanche was hurried forward between Hal and her father.

Our friends had been discovered by one of the Indians, several parties of whom had been kept at work scouring the woods in search of Blanche. In response to his yell, Indians began to gather from almost every direction, threatening to surround the little party. But Shang's address enabled them to break through the cordon before its gaps closed about them, in accomplishing which the long-limbed scout unceremoniously snatched Blanche from her father and Hal, and ran with her in his arms at the top of his speed, until he was nearly out of breath.

Now, the hundred and twenty pounds, more or less, of blushing femininity, which lovers (in books—nowhere else) so often lift "like a child," is what may be termed, in vulgar parlance, "no fool of a lift;" but the scout's Herculean strength and endurance, together with his unusual length of limb, enabled him to carry the girl over the ground, for a short distance, much more rapidly than she could have traversed the same space on foot, hampered as she must have been by her clothing, in the dense undergrowth. With her keen sense of humor, a comical little thought—"Oh, dear! how much nicer it would be, if one were occasionally allowed the use of one's feet?"—made Blanche smile, even in that moment of danger; yet she knew that Shang's course was really the wisest, though she divined but half of his purpose. For, besides the effort to gain the outside of the closing circle of Indians, the scout wished that her feet should leave no trail. He had picked her up from stony ground; he placed her upon her feet again on a flat rock in the midst of another spot of stony ground; so that, since leaving the cave, her foot had made no distinguishable impression.

"It's no use o' talkin'," he said, rapidly. "We can't run away from the Injins with this little woman on our hands. In ten minutes the hull kit 'ud be on top of us, an' we couldn't save her. We've got to hide her; an' this here's the best place within a mile."

Instinctively Blanche looked to Walter for his approval. Was ever a woman who did not place the judgment of the man she really loved before that of every one else?

Mr. Burbank looked a little frightened at the

idea of separation from his child; and Hal was about to enter a decided protest. Burly Ben saw the wisdom of Shang's words; but before he could interfere Walter spoke in his quiet, yet decided way, which molded all wills to his own.

"Do as Shang says. To his experience I would intrust my life—and more!"

Blanche's eyes flashed at this involuntary expression with which his love for her surprised his caution. Her ear was quick to catch every cadence of his voice, that the words "and more" told her as plainly as words could tell—"I love you more than my life!"

Shang saw the father's opposition vanish. For Hal and his pretensions, so far as they concerned Blanche, whom he had mentally dedicated to Walter, he cared not a last-year's bird's nest.

At the further end of the flat rock on which Blanche stood grew a sturdy oak whose trunk was completely hidden by a veil of vines, very dense in foliage, which trailed over the rock, forming a sort of tent-shaped bower. Passing his hands between the rock and the vines, Shang lifted them with the nicest care, and said:

"Creep in here, little one! carefully, now, so's not to bruise the vines!"

"Papa!" cried the girl, extending her arms.

"God bless and keep you, my child!"

A straining embrace and a kiss as if she would "pluck it up by the roots;" then, with a sweeping glance which rested last on Walter's eyes:

"Good-by, all!"

And she crept beneath the curtain of verdure which Shang let fall behind her.

"Lay down in the hollow between the rock and the tree," directed the scout, "an' don't ye stir hand or foot, even if some one peeps in here, until they actually take hold of ye!"

Then Blanche heard retreating footsteps, and, a moment afterward, with yells that curdled her blood, the rush of savages, whose dark bodies she could see through interstices in the vines; then the shots and yells, receding in the distance, which marked a running fight.

Among all those shots, would any one reach a mark through which it would pierce her heart?

"Oh God! protect papa and—Walter!" she prayed, throwing such a world of yearning love into the name that it must have reached the Throne.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TREACHERY.

THE Indians in pursuit of our friends were soon checked in their bold rush by the unerring shots of the two trained scouts, those less used to forest warfare, yet brave men withal, also doing their share. The Sioux continued with greater caution, gliding from tree to tree, trying to outflank the little party and detain them until their own numbers were increased by the fast-coming reinforcements from the mouth of the cave.

In much the same manner our friends were forced to retreat, keeping together as much as possible, until Shang said:

"We can't stand this. Together we'll soon be surrounded like Daniel in the lion's den. It's got to be every man for himself. Do ye see that dead oak on the hill yonder? That's our rendezvous. An' now scatter!"

Acting on his suggestion they began to spread out, separating gradually from each other. A deadly light began to glow in Harry Bearsley's eyes, as he looked from side to side, keeping watch over his companions.

"This is my opportunity!" he muttered; "and may the fiend deal with me as I improve it!"

By skillful maneuvering he kept within sight of Walter, while the divergent courses of the others took them out of sight.

"Now to secure myself, if that fool has discovered anything from my precious wife—that was! and to cut short his interloping attentions to my wife who is to be!"

While, with his attention occupied by his foes in front, Walter was gliding between two trees, Hal's rifle went to his shoulder; his teeth were set, showing fiercely beneath his mustache; his eye glanced deadly hatred along the barrel; and the piece exploded.

With a stinging sensation in his breast, Walter started, gasped, and fell heavily to the ground.

"So die the fool's death!" muttered Hal, exultantly. "If my bullet is not effective, the Indians will roast you to a delicate brown—and I hope they may have the opportunity! The man who crosses my path—Hah!"

His ejaculation was occasioned by the appearance of Bantam on the spot where Walter had fallen.

"Walter, my boy, you're not shot?" exclaimed the scout, with deep feeling, bending over his prostrate friend.

"Yes, Bantam," replied Walter, faintly. "I fear that my left lung is pierced."

"Curses on the beggarly crew! I'll have twenty lives for this!" cried Bantam. "But I

must git you out o' this. Come! let me take you on my back."

"Save yourself, Bantam. You cannot escape incumbered by such a burden."

"An' leave you to the Soos? Burn me, if I do!"

While speaking he raised Walter to his feet; turned and mounted him on his back; and made off through the woods as rapidly and as noiselessly as he could.

But he had proceeded scarcely a dozen rods, when one hand suddenly relaxed its hold on Walter, and the scout stumbled and fell. While going down he caught sight of a puff of smoke at no great distance on his left, and beside it the face of a white man firing at him excitedly, but he did not hear Hal's exultant comment on the result of his second shot:

"Two, by heaven! and the dog dropped like a stone. I had nothing against him; but he might have been dangerous to me."

He shuddered, as he sneaked off through the woods, and tried to appease the compunctions which still remained to him by the reflection:

"It might have been my life against his."

And with a horrible laugh he added:

"Well, what is one murder, more or less, anyway? The first had not so great provocation as the last."

The scout rose to a sitting posture, after his fall, and put his hand to his left shoulder, the arm of which hung helpless.

"I can't use my rifle no more, he said; 'but I've got two good shots left in my pistols. So let the devils come on; I'll sell out two to one, anyhow!'"

"But you may still escape by flight," suggested Walter.

"Boy," said the scout, "I mean to stick to you till the last dog's hung; an' then they kin rub us out together."

"No, Bantam," said Walter, in the quiet, direct tones he used when in deep earnest, "you would destroy yourself without doing me any good by so foolish a resistance. The only way you can help me is to escape yourself, and then with Shang and the rest attempt my rescue, after you have placed Miss Burbank in safety. The rendezvous is Pigeon Oak; and Miss Burbank is secreted in the vine tent."

"Boy," said Bantam, pathetically, yielding in spite of himself, "I hate to desert ye so."

"It is not deserting me. It is going for assistance. Go at once, before it is too late."

"At any rate, I kin help ye to cover."

Walter accepted this assistance; and when he was secreted as effectually as circumstances would permit, Bantam turned to go, to find himself confronted by the savages, one of whom he kills on the spot, and then fled before the other two.

CHAPTER XXX.

HUMILIATION.

AN hour later the random firing in the woods had ceased. The dead lay in peace; the wounded struggled against their anguish. Those who had been scattered far and wide in that hot pursuit began to reassemble, moving more slowly while they recovered their breath, or because incumbered with the burden of their wounded comrades.

Then a helpless prisoner was borne to the Indian rendezvous, where Buffalo Horn had made his first halt, and dropped roughly upon the ground.

William Swanton advanced to view his prisoner. At sight of his face he started, and then kneeling, looked closer.

"In the fiend's name, who are you?" he asked, changing color.

Walter looked into the face of the renegade, and started in his turn. Then with a shudder he closed his eyes, as if the sight were unbearable.

"Speak!" cried Swanton, seizing him by the arm. "Who are you?"

"Do you not know me, then?" asked Walter, bitterly. "God knows I have reason to remember you!"

The renegade stared a moment, and then a look of satisfaction came into his face, together with his ever-ready sneer, as he said:

"God be praised! for the dead is alive again, and the lost is found."

Turning to Mrs. Burbank, who was advancing toward them, he added:

"Madam, rejoice with me over the return of my prodigal son!"

At sight of the lady Walter started to his elbow, exclaiming:

"My God! You here—in this man's power!"

With a shudder he sunk back again.

"Mr. Weston! What a meeting!" murmured the lady; and kneeling on the other side of him, she clasped his hand and dropped her tears upon it. "My husband!—my daughter!—"

But the poor lady broke down, her words choked by a storm of sobs.

"Do not grieve, dear Mrs. Burbank," said Walter. "They are safe."

"But my husband was in this terrible cave!"

"He escaped."

"And my child!—my darling Blanche!"

"She, too, is safe."

"But where?" urged the lady.

Swanton bent eagerly to catch the reply.

Walter caught the expression of his face; and looking at him with flashing eyes, made his reply to him.

"All the hellish ingenuity of your bloody allies cannot torture that secret out of me!"

"We will try to get along without your assistance," said Swanton, dryly.

"Lud 'a' massay! if that ain't Jim!"

It was Jerusha Swanton's voice that broke in upon the interview; and Jerusha herself stood with hands raised, mouth open, and eyes round with surprise.

Walter turned his eyes from her in disgust.

But the virago advanced to his feet, where she could view him at her ease, and with her arms akimbo, began her wonted tirade:

"So here ye be, you ungrateful wretch! to run away the minute yer father's back was turned, an' leave me to shift fur myself—me as had toiled an' slaved fur ye from morn till dark, and no thanks from you, from the day you was a squallin' brat! Mighty fine airs yeou put on, as if common folks wa'n't good enough fur ye! Now, I s'pose this here brazen piece is one o' yer scrumptious friends."

"Spare your insults, woman!" cried Walter, with a look which for a moment cowed the vixen. "This lady is my friend, and must be treated with respect!"

"Mr. Weston, what in the world is the meaning of this?" exclaimed Mrs. Burbank, dismayed by Jerusha's address to her friend.

William Swanton had looked on with folded arms, quietly enjoying Walter's humiliation. Seeing that she had no opposition to fear from him, but that he, with his sneering smile, rather kept her in countenance, Jerusha again gave the rein to her tongue.

"It means, ma'am," she sneered, with a mock courtesy, "that you've got one too many irons in the fire. Yeou'd better make up yer mind whether ye want the father or the son, before ye go to makin' love to both of 'em at the same time. Don't be bashful, ma'am, if ye'd like to take his head in yer lap, as well as hold his hand; we're only his folks, an' the Injins here won't know no difference."

As if stung, Mrs. Burbank involuntarily dropped Walter's hand, and shrunk away, as she said:

"This vulgar woman cannot be your mother!"

"Vulgar yerself!" screamed Jerusha, stamping her foot, and looking as if her fingers were tingling for a vigorous hair-pull. "An' do you dast to insult me to my face—an' me an honest woman beside such a—"

"Hold on!" interposed Swanton, with a menacing flash at his wife.

An instant Jerusha paused; but seeing the quiet smile return to his lips, resumed in a somewhat milder strain:

"I hain't his mother, eh? Well, now, perhaps yeou're itchin' to step into my shoes. Yeou'd have 'em both, for a fact. Or yeou might give him to yer darter, while yeou take the old man—"

"Desist!" said Walter, stung from his dejected apathy by the flippant reference to his association with Blanche. "Man," he added, turning to Swanton, "are you a man, that you can see a helpless lady insulted like this?"

"Thank you for the reminder," said Swanton. "I will take the lady away, and leave you two to enjoy old-time reminiscences undisturbed. Helen, will you take my arm?"

Walter turned pale and stared in blank surprise at Swanton's insulting familiarity with the mother of his idol. He heard the renegade call her Helen, and saw her shudder, yet submit meekly to be led away, as if her spirit was crushed. With a groan he sunk back, his physical weakness making the bonds with which he was secured altogether unnecessary.

In his anguish, at the thought that her mother should shrink from him, shocked at learning his base origin, and that her recollection of him would be marred by the shadow of his father's infamy, Walter forgot that he had not corrected Mrs. Burbank's misapprehension that Jerusha was his mother.

Now, he lay perfectly heedless of Jerusha's sharp tongue, though, infuriated by Swanton's disappearance in company with Mrs. Burbank, she vented all her spite on one who could not retaliate.

CHAPTER XXXI.

LUCK.

WILLIAM SWANTON knew nothing of Walter's position toward Mrs. Burbank's family. It was evident, however, that Mrs. Burbank esteemed him highly. Out of pure malignity, then, the renegade seized the opportunity to separate her from Walter before her mistake as to his relationship to Jerusha was corrected.

"Helen," he said, "since you, as well as I, must feel some interest in the avenue through which your husband, and my friend, effected his escape, we will visit it together."

"Major Swanton," said the lady, with as quiet irony as his own, "will you permit me to walk without troubling you for your arm?"

The renegade flushed slightly, in spite of himself, as he released her hand with a mock bow.

"You put it so delicately," he said, "who could deny you?"

Mrs. Burbank walked freer at a little distance from her self-elected escort. She really looked forward with interest to what Swanton promised to show her. The escape of the prisoners from the cave had been concealed from her, until Walter's words lifted the burden of sorrow from her heart; so the means of escape were still unknown to her.

When they reached the exit, from which thin curls of smoke were still issuing, Mrs. Burbank gazed down its black throat with a shudder. She knew nothing of the horrors of that death race, (the passage now giving little indication of it), nor that her daughter had shared its perils; but she was thinking that in beyond was the gloomy prison, by which she had been so nearly widowed. With the thought came the picture of Swanton hurling the burning brand among the fagots, and then viewing his fiendish act with folded arms; and she shrunk further from him and involuntarily rubbed her hand on her shawl, recollecting that it had but recently been in contact with his arm.

"The next time," said Swanton, grimly, "I shall see that my smoke-house has no leak in it!"

Turning his reflective gaze from the corridor to Mrs. Burbank's face, he added, speculatively:

"I wonder, Helen, had I been successful in my benevolent intentions, could you have been persuaded to imitate excellent Mrs. Hamlet, and marry the man who had given your husband eternal bliss in exchange for the trials of this world?"

Horror-stricken, the lady seemed about to fly from him.

"Am I such a Gorgon, then," he said drawing himself erect, and removing his hat to run his fingers through his hair, "that such a prospect gives you so stony a look?"

"What a devil you are!" exclaimed the lady, with a shudder of loathing.

The renegade laughed lightly.

"We will recur to this subject in the future, when the present Mrs. Swanton has gone where she will not be distressed by our association. Meanwhile, shall we return to camp?"

"Go on. I will follow you."

"Nay! you cannot think me so ungallant. If you will not walk at my side, I should much prefer that you precede me. You know," he added, with a laugh, "if your valiant rescuer of this morning were to reappear, you might take it into your head to elope with him again—wasn't that the construction Mrs. Swanton put upon it?"

Deigning no reply, the lady set out on her return, and, choosing the ground easiest for walking, took a little different course from that by which they had come. She had proceeded scarce half the distance, when she was startled by a quick cry, followed by the rending of the bushes. Next she saw a flying figure, with fluttering drapery, and heard a voice crying:

"Oh, mamma! mamma! mamma!"

The mother had scarcely time to collect her thoughts, before she was supporting a quivering burden on her bosom, and realized, with a thrill of awful dread, that her daughter had of her own accord leaped into the wolf's den. Straining her child to her breast, she whirled upon their foe with fierce defiance in her flashing eye and quivering nostril.

The renegade had stopped, stared, thrust his hands into his pockets, blown a long whistle of surprise, and expressed a throng of emotions in the words:

"By all that's lucky!"

As the agonized mother, like some animal driven to bay in the defense of her offspring, turned toward him, he removed his hat, and bowing low with a Mephistophilean smile, said:

"Madam, allow me to con-grat-u-late you!"

A look of despairing helplessness—a flood of tears that drowned the fire of her eyes—the mother's head sinks until her cheek rests upon her daughter's hair—her lips move—

"Oh, God!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN ACKNOWLEDGED LOVE.

LET the reader imagine the anxiety with which Blanche Burbank waited and prayed in her place of concealment, after the disappearance of her friends. Herself unseen, she several times caught glimpses of the Indians as they came and went in the vicinity of her retreat. Once her heart leaped into her mouth, as she heard a savage parting the leaves which screened her. She could hear his panting respiration, and fancy painted his gleaming eyes, though she hid her face with her hands. But he failed to detect her, and passed on.

Then the moments dragged on, until she caught sight of a figure which made her utter a sudden cry, and then stare through the vine leaves as if she could scarcely credit her own vision. How she tore her way through the platted vines she never knew. As if at a bound, she was on her knees with her arms about her mother's waist, her eyes blinded by a flood of

tears, her voice choked with a throng of emotions.

While the mother's fierce defiance broke under the burden of despair, the child was speechless. If she heard, she did not heed the renegade's incisive sarcasm. She had eyes, ears and thoughts but for the mother from whom she had been torn, and whom she now once more clasped in her arms. When she found voice, her heart burst forth:

"Oh, mamma! mamma! mamma! you here!—and surrounded by such awful dangers! My darling mamma!"

"Hush! hush, my child! We are in God's hands."

"Under my supervision, as the divine vice-gent!" sneered the renegade, with another profound bow. "My dear, we are overjoyed at your restoration. You threw us into quite a panic of anxiety. You should not ramble so far from camp as to lose your way."

The pride of the girl flamed into her eyes, as, looking over her shoulder at him, she replied:

"Thank you for your solicitude. The time may not be far distant when you will need it all for yourself."

"Oh, I'll risk that," laughed Swanton. "With a slight advantage in point of numbers, and unexampled good luck—a better friend than Providence, my dear, if we may judge by the hard lines of the virtuous—with luck and numbers in my favor, don't you think the game is pretty well in my hands?"

"Meanwhile, Helen," he added, "if you care to walk toward the camp—"

He concluded the sentence with a bow and a wave of the hand.

"Mamma, how dare he address you so familiarly?" exclaimed Blanche, her indignation struggling with a vague dread.

"We are in his power, darling," murmured the mother submissively.

"But who is he? Do you know him? And what grudge does he hold against papa? His hatred dates back twenty years."

The dread was deepening in her eyes. She spoke in an indistinct murmuring tone which could not be intelligible to Swanton as they preceded him.

"We knew him years ago as Tom Tracy," began Mrs. Burbank.

"Yes; but why does he hate papa? What is it all about?"

A pained expression came into the lady's face. She did not reply directly. While she was deliberating they entered the glade where Jerusha Swanton had talked herself weary over her inattentive auditor, and finally left him in disgust.

Blanche's quick eye detected the prisoner, as he lay with his back toward her. Every article of his dress was long since familiar to her loving eye. She recognized him at a glance.

The mother felt her start violently within her encircling arms, with a short, sharp cry. The next instant—everything else forgotten in contemplation of his danger—the girl tore herself free and flew to him.

"Oh, Walter! you are not hurt?" she cried, the pain in her heart, that agonized fear that she was to lose him, breaking down all conventionalities.

It was like a flash—her sudden appearance kneeling beside him; her tremulous touch on his shoulder; her eyes reading his face with a solicitude which could have but one meaning; her voice vibrant with loving fear and gliding into liquid cadences over his name. An instant his face glowed with a look that seemed almost luminous, as his eyes devoured her; then a spasm of pain and a look of terror came like the sudden interposition of a mask, and he tried to start erect.

"Great Heaven! are you again in his power?"

"What is it?" asked the girl, shrinking closer to him and looking back at Swanton with a new fear in her eyes. There seemed to be some deeper meaning in the emphasis of her lover's words.

The renegade's manner was not reassuring. He stood with folded arms, caressing his mustache, and regarding the pair with a cruel smile.

But she felt the loved form sink under her hand, and, turning again, saw that he lay as white as death.

"Oh, you are hurt!" she exclaimed. "Where is your wound?"

With a gushing cry she detected the blood on the breast of his jerkin, and the perforation made by the bullet. Her lips were white and set with an awful dread, and her fingers flew over the fastenings of his jerkin.

"It is nothing!" he gasped, as she bared his breast.

With a frightened sob she pressed her handkerchief over the wound.

"Oh, mamma! help me!" she cried, as Mrs. Burbank knelt on the other side of the prostrate man; and in the look and tone of that supplication the heart of the one woman was an open book to the perception of the other.

If Mrs. Burbank felt any shock at this discovery, her humanity was so far in the ascendancy as effectually to hide it. She manifested only anxiety akin to her daughter's.

"Major Swanton," she said, haughtily, "will you place at my command the appliances necessary for this man's care? I know little about such matters; but I believe that my good-will will serve him better than your grudging skill."

"No doubt, madam," sneered the renegade, and turning addressed a single word in the Delaware tongue to one of the Indians.

The savage disappeared, but soon came back with water in a broad leaf folded like a filtering paper. As he held it for her to dip her handkerchief into it, Blanche thanked him in English. Her sweet look must have been intelligible to him, though her words were not.

While she bathed the wound with a loving touch, Jerusha Swanton's harsh voice broke the silence.

"Wal, I swan to man!" she exclaimed, with a chuckle, "if Jim hain't clean cut out his daddy! He! he! he!"

Blanche glanced up at her as the discordant voice broke upon her ear; but she was too busy with her mission of love to pay further heed.

"See, mamma!" she cried. "The bullet has lacerated his side. It did not strike fairly so as to penetrate his breast. It must have glanced on the rib. Oh! if it is only not dangerous! You don't think it is, mamma?"

Already she was aglow with hope.

"I think the bone is not broken," said Mrs. Burbank. "It is only a flesh wound and a severe shock, being so close over the heart."

"Oh! you shall find us famous nurses—Mr. Weston!" cried the girl, in her relief at the knowledge that his life was not in jeopardy from his wound, forgetting, for the moment, the grave dangers which hung over them all. She blushed as she faltered over his name, recollecting that in her unguarded moment her tongue had found the one which lay nearest her heart.

His eyes told her that her touch was more potent for healing than the rarest lotions; and indeed the magic contact so thrilled him that it banished the look of pain from his face; but the words that trembled on his lips were doomed to harsh interruption.

Jerusha had aimed a malicious little thrust at her husband in saying that "Jim had cut out his daddy," but the renegade had read Blanche's secret for himself. Frowning darkly, he had muttered beneath his breath:

"So! But of course she could not love that wolf's cub. Curse him! he's too much like his father not to inspire an intuitive repugnance in so sensitive a nature as hers."

Turning to his wife he said rapidly:

"If you want to do me a favor and enjoy yourself at the same time, give them a little of your peculiar style of eloquence. But mind that you keep a bridle on your tongue; for if you insult either of the ladies grossly, I'll have it out of your hide!"

The wifely duty of obedience lying in the direct line of her own inclinations, Jerusha advanced, nothing loath, and, while the lovers were all atremble with timid outreachings toward each other, and the mind of Mrs. Burbank was sorely perplexed over the discovery she had made, said:

"I reckon it's my place to 'tend Jim. I've coddled him when he was sick an' trounced him when he was sassy, from the time he was knee-high to a grasshopper; an' I hain't goin' to be shamed to my face now, by havin' strangers take the care o' him out o' my hands. See here, miss, you ain't puttin' that bandage right."

She dispossessed the loving hands with so peremptory a motion that the sufferer winced with pain, while the girl shrunk back in dismay. Only an instant, and then she extended her hand again.

"Mrs. Swanton, I protest," she began.

But Jerusha whirled upon her with the demand:

"Is this Jim, or ain't it? Air you his mother, or ain't ye?"

A look of gratification flashed into the face of the renegade. Instantly he stepped forward.

"Ladies," he said, "there is but one escape from Mrs. Swanton's pleasantries. Allow me to lead you away."

Blanche would have demurred; but he took her arm with a look that was a command, and she was forced to submit.

"These beauties will guard you, while you enjoy each other's society," he said, when he had taken them apart; and with a few rapid words he indicated their duty to the savages, and left them.

"Why did she call him Jim, mamma?" asked Blanche wonderingly, the moment they were alone.

"Because it is his name, I presume," replied the mother somewhat coldly.

"Why, no! It is Walter—Weston."

The Christian name was uttered with a brightening countenance, the surname being added after a momentary pause, in which the searching look of the mother brought a tremulous flush to Blanche's cheek. Reaching to clasp her parent about the neck, the girl murmured with pretty deprecation:

"Mamma!"

"My daughter!" said the lady gravely, folding the trembling form close to her heart.

"Yes, mamma," whispered the girl, kissing her on the cheek. "I never have any secrets from you. And, oh, mamma! mamma!"

She quivered with an ecstasy of love, hiding her face with maiden shame yet longing to show her heart and win that sweet sympathy which had never failed her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

EXIT JERUSA.

MRS. BURBANK was so long silent that her daughter began to feel vaguely apprehensive.

"Blanche," she said at last, "has he spoken to you?"

"Not in words. But, oh, you cannot know his reverent delicacy. And, mamma, I love him so!—with my whole heart and soul!"

Again the lady was silent, until Blanche raised her head, and seeing the look of pain, asked, all in a panic:

"Mamma, what is the matter? Is he not worthy? You cannot—Mamma!"

"Hush! hush! my child!"

The lady sought to avert her face from the searching look of her child.

"What are you thinking about, mamma? What pains you?" persisted the girl.

"His parents—such parents!" exclaimed the lady, desperately, with a shudder of disgust.

A look of pain darted across the girl's face.

"You would not be so unjust as to blame him for what he cannot help!" she said. "He has nothing in common with them. He is as grand as they are ignoble. That is his misfortune. And, mamma, I love him all the more tenderly, knowing what he must suffer."

"And your relations with Harry Bearsley?"

Instantly the girl bristled with resistance.

"Mamma, that is a mistake which must be set right at once. I know papa will not ask me to sacrifice my happiness to fulfill an arrangement entered into by him and Mr. Bearsley before I was born. I never could be happy with Harry; and if he has seemed to acquiesce in the plan, as I have, from the force of habit, I know he does not love me as a man should love his wife."

"And, mamma, weren't you always prepossessed by—Walter, himself?"

She returns to him with such coy tenderness, and looks for her answer so hungrily, yet so confidently, that the mother can hesitate only a moment, and then smiling indulgently in the winsome face, says, honestly:

"Yes!"

Her reward is a little storm of grateful caresses and endearing epithets; and for the moment she allows her daughter's happiness to lift the cloud from her heart.

But in the very midst of her happiness the daughter suddenly breaks into frightened sobs, explained by her whispered words:

"But, mamma, he is a prisoner! What will become of him?"

The mother soothes her, and, to divert her thought from this most painful theme, engages her in a narration of the events of her life since her severance from her home. The narrative progresses until the advent of Walter, when he is made the central figure, and his tenderness and gallantry are dwelt upon with glowing fervor. Mrs. Burbank notices that Hal is almost wholly left out of the story, and asks:

"What was Harry doing all this time?"

The girl flushes, and with something of indignation, replies:

"I believe he was for the most part intent upon looking out for himself! But see! who is this prisoner?"

It was Bantam, looking very anxiously about to see if Walter had been captured. He was led in by Sidney and his body-guard of savages, now reduced to four in number. Wounded as he was, the sturdy hunter had sold his liberty at the price of two lives. A settled frown darkened Sidney's face, and his eyes had a hungry look. He sat down on a lowlier, with drooping shoulders and hanging head.

"Well, boy, they've got us both, for sartin'," said Bantam, as he approached his friend. "I'm mighty sorry they got their hooks onto you. I set almost as much store by you as by Shang—an' that's a good deal."

"Thank you, Bantam," said Walter. "But I do not care so much for myself. The lady whose trail you came upon has fallen into their hands. Bantam, it's a slim chance; but if you ever get free and can rescue her, you will do that for which I would thank you more than if I had a thousand lives, and you saved them all. Understand that she is not a stranger to me."

"Poor young woman!" said the scout, looking over at the ladies. "Boy, I'll remember this; though, as you say, it's a mighty slim chance."

By Swanton's direction, food was now placed before the prisoners, out of the evening meal prepared by the savages, which, in spite of her grief, Blanche found very grateful, after her fasting of twenty-four hours. When they were done, the sun hung upon the western horizon.

In pursuance of the renegade's orders, Walter and Bantam were placed in the midst of a party of savages, and marched off through the forest.

When Blanche found that she was to be separated from her lover, without so much as a

word in leave-taking; she threw herself upon her mother's bosom and wept piteously, while Mrs. Burbank afforded her such consolation as a mother's heart can prompt. But they were interrupted by Swanton, who appeared with horses, and informed them that they would be put to the inconvenience of moving a few miles in charge of a second party of Indians before camping for the night.

When they were gone, he entered into conversation with Buffalo Horn, from which they were startled by Mrs. Swanton's voice raised in angry expostulation close at hand, followed by a piercing shriek and the thud of a body falling to the ground.

Sidney, we have said, had come into camp despondent. He remained buried in his bitter thoughts until startled from them by his mother's voice, crying:

"You painted heathen! dew ye think yew'll be let rob the dead? Gim'me that shawl here!"

Instantly, he was upon his feet, with a picture drawn in lines of fire on his brain. In the hurry of the search for Blanche, and in his eagerness for revenge, Mary Edwards had not been buried, but laid out on the green turf, beneath the murmuring trees, her piteous plight hidden beneath the bright scarlet shawl she had worn. Sidney asked himself—was his dead being desecrated?

Before he had scarcely time for thought, he was thrilled by his mother's scream, followed by a dull, grinding sound, which made his blood run cold, and a fall.

With great bounds, he burst through the intervening thicket, to come upon a sight which, for an instant, froze him to a statue of ice.

Be it known that Jerusha Swanton had cast covetous eyes on the scarlet shawl, calculating how it might be purified and made to adorn her own person. She was troubled by no sentiment which would mar the pleasure of such an acquisition. When, then, we say that she suddenly came upon a "painted heathen," in the person of the Speaking Rifle, in the act of surreptitiously appropriating the shawl—perhaps as a memento—her natural indignation is explained. Emboldened by her husband's power over the savages, she had come to look upon them with less fear; and her cupidity now goaded her into forgetfulness of all caution. With as little ceremony as if he had been "Bill Swanton," or Sidney, she snatched the shawl from his hand, addressing to him words whose opprobrium—if not their exact meaning—was unmistakably intelligible.

The Speaking Rifle was not used to being thus bearded by a squaw; and one sweep of his tomahawk silenced her querulous voice forever. It was while he was stooping to regain the shawl that Sidney appeared upon the scene, closely followed by his father and the other savages.

At a glance he took in the whole situation. He had loved his mother, much as a wolf's whelp loves its dam. His rifle leaped to his shoulder, and wiped out blood with blood. The Speaking Rifle fell like a log, without a groan. But a score of throats yelled fierce resentment; and the youth's life was threatened on every hand.

For the third time, the renegade's magic call suspended immediate action; but this time the weapons were not returned, nor was the attitude of hostility relaxed. All eyes were turned upon Buffalo Horn. In his hands lay the power of life and death.

Swanton addressed him a few rapid words, in which he played upon a jealousy existing between the two chiefs, to such effect that the survivor waved his hand in command to his fellows to desist.

"The Rattlesnake was a squaw, but the squaw of a great chief," he said. "The Speaking Rifle paid his life for hers. Let the feud die with them; nor let us alienate our powerful friend."

Sullenly the Indians obeyed. But one there was whose fierce eye rested upon Sidney with a look which would have warned him, had he seen it, that the savage only bided his time.

Swanton was very pale as he bent over his wife. There had been little love between them; but the suddenness and violence of her death had shocked him. But when he had buried her, which he did at once, he had so far recovered that he reflected:

"Well, she was 'called' at a time very convenient for me. It has taken a disagreeable business off my hands; for I certainly should not have let her stand between Helen and me."

The deepening twilight saw the work of interment completed, and wasting no time in formal grief, Swanton rallied the Indians and led them to the spot where Blanche had been secreted. As the moon cast her silver beams into the glades, they discovered no indication that the forest was longer tenanted. Silvan solitude reigned supreme. How was Nature's sanctuary soon to be desecrated?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FIGHT IN THE GLADE.

ONCE more the friends—Mr. Burbank, Hal and Burly Ben—were united beneath the oak which Shang had appointed as a rendezvous. Carlton Burbank sat in a dejected attitude; Hal

lay at full length upon his back, looking pale and exhausted; the hunter, whose thews seemed proof against any tax, was trying to cheer up his companions; the moon shed its serene light over all.

"There is no use in our waiting any longer," said Mr. Burbank, starting up. "Our friends are unable to come to us, or they would have been here by this time. And who can tell what tortures the poor child has suffered during the long hours of our absence, even if she has escaped the terrible dangers by which she was surrounded?"

"The time we've waited hain't been thrown away, 'squire," said Ben. "I reckon you an' Hal's nigh enough dead men now, after havin' blowed a spell, to venture back where we've got to go to git Miss Blanche. We hain't out o' the woods yet by a few, or I lose my guess."

"You are sufficiently recruited, are you not, Harry?" asked Mr. Burbank.

Hal raised himself, not without effort, and said, simply:

"Yes." It was not more than half an hour since the last of them had dragged himself, almost dead with fatigue, to the rendezvous. The short respite had revived them a little; but they had not energy enough to talk, and so pursued their way in silence.

Burly Ben's habitual caution prompted him to reconnoiter the spot himself, before letting the others approach Blanche's place of concealment; but Mr. Burbank's anxiety would not hear to the delay.

"There is not a sound," he said. "Most likely the Indians have gone into camp on the other side of the hill, before the mouth of the cave. Let us waste no more time. My darling may now be lying in a swoon of terror."

Burly Ben yielded, by no means content. They reached the vine-tent, and Mr. Burbank called softly:

"Blanche, my child, we have come for you."

No answer.

"Blanche! Blanche! It is your father who calls."

Dead silence.

"My God! Has she been recaptured?"

"She may be swooned, as you suggested," volunteered Hal.

Without a word, Mr. Burbank dropped upon his hands and knees and crept beneath the vines. A moment of painful suspense, and then the listeners heard a groan.

"She's gone!" said Ben, and an awful hush followed.

The vine leaves parted again, and the agonized father stood before them speechless. With ready sympathy Ben grasped his hand and received his head upon his shoulder.

"Cheer up, 'squire," he said, feelingly. "While there's life there's hope, ye know. We're down to-day; but that ain't sayin' we won't be up to-morrow."

"They have retaken her and gone!" said the bereaved parent, and his iron frame shook with anguish.

Then the silence which followed was broken by a voice which said:

"You don't seem to have found what you were looking for, my dear Burbank."

The three started and saw William Swanton standing with folded arms in the middle of the moon-lit glade. His face wore a smile of cruel triumph. Before his auditors had recovered from the shock of this sudden revelation, he added:

"I need not tell you, gentlemen, that you are my prisoners."

"Never!" cried the outraged father. Well he knew, as did his companions, that captivity meant death, made horrible, doubtless, by torture. His pistol exploded almost in Swanton's face. Then there was a sudden rising from every bush and coppice; and they knew that they had been cleverly ambushed.

Pen cannot depict the scene that followed. The three men, surrounded by a multitude of foes, might have been shot down at a single discharge; but Swanton had ordered them to be taken alive. Their simple death would not appease his malignity.

Sidney was fiendish in his fury, as he leaped upon Hal.

"Now, murderer!" he cried, "I come to avenge Mary Edwards!"

The sound of that name gave Hal the strength of a madman. In an instant the two were clasped in a mute embrace, staggering hither and thither and spinning round and round in such rapid evolutions that no interference was possible.

In the end Hal's strength or address prevailed. He forced his antagonist against a sapling, curving its slender trunk and bending the vanquished man over it, so as to bring his breast fairly upward. Clutching the throat of his intended victim, he raised his knife for the fatal blow.

Sidney looked demoniac in his hatred and despair. He saw his revenge baffled, and the murderer of his love now about to add his death to hers.

But the murderous knife was stayed. A voice which thrilled Hal to the heart cried:

"Stop, for God's sake! It is your brother that you are about to kill!"

A moment of hesitation, in which Hal looked up and caught a glimpse of Swanton's face, looking ghastly in the moonlight; then, with a fierce oath, the would-be fratricide gripped his knife more firmly, and leaning forward to give greater impetus to the blow, plunged it downward.

But the hand was torn aside, and the next instant he lay on his back, with Sidney's foot on his throat.

"Now, you devil!" cried the victor, throwing his weight upon the neck of his victim until the latter's eyes protruded with strangulation, "now it is my turn! Now I will show you how much torture can be crowded into one death! I shall scourge you with nettles; then flay you alive; then put salt upon your raw flesh; then stick splinters into you; then roast you by a slow fire! I shall rack you between bent saplings! I shall—curse you! a thousand new tortures shall be invented, until Mary is avenged!"

All this time Mr. Burbank and Burly Ben were fighting with the desperation of men who knew that more than life depended upon their efforts. The dead and wounded lay all about them; but the living wall, ever renewed, hedged them about more and more closely. Mr. Burbank was already down, and Ben was fighting over him, faithful to the last, yet almost overpowered by the numbers that threw themselves upon him from every side, when the woods rung with a shrill whoop which was not Sioux.

And now the assailants were desperately fighting on the defensive in their turn. Forgetful of their single surviving foe, they only sought to escape from the new enemy.

Dashing the blood from his eyes, Burly Ben saw that Indian was struggling against Indian!

CHAPTER XXXV.

BOYHOOD FRIENDS.

FOR an instant the scene was unintelligible to Ben, and then recollecting the shrill war-whoop which had heralded the new assault, he divined it all—the Sioux had been attacked by a party of Cheyennes.

But what boded this to him or his friends? Were they to escape one set of savages only to fall into the hands of another?

As if to answer his questions, a white man forced his way to the hunter's side, crying:

"Ben, for God's sake, where is Carlton Burbank?"

"Here, if he is not dead," replied Ben, and stooped down to lift the fallen man from where he had been standing astride of him in the hopeless attempt to beat off his foes.

The combatants had now left the glade, and the sounds of conflict were fast receding through the woods.

The newly-arrived bent over Mr. Burbank and examined him anxiously by the aid of the moonlight. Meanwhile Burly Ben was staring blankly at his timely friend.

"Who in thunder be you?" he asked, speaking huskily.

The man addressed looked up, and said:

"Need you ask? Don't you know me?"

"MAJOR BEARSLEY!"

Honest Ben gasped out the words, his face as white as that of any corpse.

"Help me to revive him. He is not dead," said the major, quietly.

Ben set about the necessary measures like one in a dream.

When Mr. Burbank showed signs of recovering, the major said, hastily:

"It will not be well for him to see me at the first moment; I will join you again, when he has fully recovered."

Noiselessly he stepped back into the shadows.

"That's the way!" muttered Burly Ben, a shade whiter, if possible, than before. "We won't see no more o' you, I'll bet my last bullet!"

"Ben! Ben! we are not captured?" were Mr. Burbank's first words.

"No, 'squire. We was rescued at the very last hitch."

"Rescued? How?"

"By a spook!"

"A what?"

"By the ghost o' Major Bearsley, that is dead an' gone this twenty years, eanymost."

"Nonsense, Ben! A ghost couldn't fight Indians."

"I tell ye the major come here with a pack o' spooks that was meant for Cheyennes at his back, an' stampeded the Sioux like smoke. You see the Sioux ain't here; an' if you kin find hide or hair o' the major or his spooks, I'll eat my hat."

Further discussion was cut short by a rippling cry; and Blanche Burbank sunk almost fainting into her father's arms, her appearance from the shadows being as sudden as if she had dropped from the sky.

"What! My child? Thank God, she is restored to us!"

"And—oh, papa!—there is some one else! Do not be startled. We are all safe now."

"Some one else?"

"CARLTON!"

The wife could not wait longer. Tottering

with excess of joy, she too sunk upon her husband's breast, and clung to him sobbing.

"Helen! My wife! You here!"

With a great terror in his heart he clasped both his darlings in one embrace.

"God protect them!—they are all I have!"

"We are safe, papa!—we are safe!" urged Blanche.

"And here is our rescuer!"

"Carlton!"

"Harry!"

Not the young Harry this time; but the father who had gone away to the mountain country with Tom Tracy and never returned. The boyhood friends were restored to each other, after all these years of separation!

Burly Ben could scarcely be made to believe that it was the major in real flesh and blood; but when he was satisfied, he shed tears over the hand of his old patron.

"I promised you I'd stick by little Hal while wood grows an' water run, an' I've—"

The hunter stopped and looked frightened.

"What has become of Hal?" asked Mr. Burbank, suddenly made aware of his absence.

"I've stuck by him until this very hour, an' tried to make a man of him," said honest Ben, much distressed. "If he's knocked under now, I'll never forgive myself—never!"

And the hunter began to search for the body of his young *protège*.

We will take advantage of the period of painful suspense that ensued for a brief retrospect.

The party of Indians having Walter Weston and Bantam in charge pursued their course westward no longer than an hour, and then went into camp. They had scarcely bestowed themselves about the fire, in their blankets, when their guard fell. His gurgling yell brought them to their feet; but already a dusky form had glided to the side of the prisoners and cut their bonds with rapid slashes.

"Now for life an' death!" cried Shang, as he thrust a knife into the hands of his friends.

Then his ringing cry sounded the charge; and after a brief struggle they held the field.

An hour later they were where they heard the first sounds of the fight in the glade. Hurrying on, they came upon Sidney and his Indians, who held Hal bound. At the first onslaught of the Cheyennes, Sidney had sought to secure his own prize, leaving his father to take care of himself.

Shang and his friends boldly sprung to Hal's rescue.

Sidney seeing himself about to be baffled, drew his knife and sprung upon his foe.

"Die!—curse you!" he shouted. "I had planned a more fitting death for you."

But a dark form glided between him and his intended victim and clutched his uplifted arm.

"I am the Barking Wolf, brother of the Speaking Rifle whose blood you spilled! Die you!—like a dog!"

The knife of the savage was plunged deep into the breast of his foe, but Walter's rifle claimed the forfeit; and the avenger fell upon the body of his victim.

Hal was uninjured; and in a moment he was on his feet with the others, back to the glade, to find Burly Ben looking for his body.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE RENEGADE'S REVENGE.

"Hooray!" cried the delighted Ben, clutching Hal and dragging him forward. "Here he is, major, in his best clo's! An' Hal, here's yer father—or his spook—I don't know which!"

Hal was bewildered; but he managed to grasp the major's hand and stammer something.

In his delight Mr. Burbank embraced Hal, forgetting to notice that Major Bearsley's reception of his son was less demonstrative.

Blanche had caught sight of Walter, and clutching her mother's arm, she murmured:

"Oh, mamma! he has been saved!"

Her intense gaze drew Walter's eyes; and with a sudden flush, he stepped toward her. Impulsively she extended both hands, with glistening eyes and quivering lips. At the very instant he bent over those loved hands, to press his lips to them, Blanche heard her father say:

"And, Harry, I've remembered our pledge. I've brought up your boy and my girl for each other; and our love will be bound closer in their union. Blanche, my darling, come here."

Cut to the soul, the girl snatched her hands from the lips hungering to touch them and flung her arms about her mother's neck.

"Save me, mamma!—save me!" she cried.

"Hush, darling! I will," was the mother's assurance, as she disengaged the arms that clung to her, and gave the girl to her father.

Walter had shrunk back with a quick flush, followed by a deadly pallor. In his ecstasy he had not heard Mr. Burbank's words. He only knew that when he was on the point of kissing the hands of the woman who enslaved his heart, she had snatched them away.

Mrs. Burbank turned and saw the white agony. Quick compassion stirred in her sympathetic breast. Reaching out her hand, she placed it on his arm. It was her mother's hand, and he kissed it.

"So this is your darling—may I say *our* darling? How like her mother she has grown!" said the major, tenderly, holding Blanche at arm's-length. "May I kiss you, my dear? Bless you, my child!" he added. "I love you already as if you were indeed my daughter."

"Here, Hal," pursued Mr. Burbank, wishing to make every one else as happy as himself. "Join hands with your lady-love, and renew your betrothal before your father, who has been restored to us as if from the grave. We planned this before you were born, boy. Thank God, we are both alive to see its consummation."

Hal stepped forward, nothing loth, shooting a glance of triumph at Walter.

Shang had been watching this scene with folded arms. A grim smile lighted his face, as he noticed the turn affairs were taking. Stepping to Walter's side he whispered:

"Hold on, boy—you hain't bushed yet! Baal, Beelzebub an' Apollyon don't get that gal—nor none o' his crew!"

Walter stared at his friend, not comprehending him, yet with a vague sense that there was some important meaning beneath the scout's words. Shang shook his head and repeated:

"Jest you wait!"

Hal stepped forward with alacrity, but Major Bearsley felt the girl clutch him more closely, with a shiver.

"What is the matter, my child?" he whispered close in her ear.

"I don't love him!" she pleaded piteously.

Major Bearsley kissed her hair, as if to reassure her. A pained look which all along had clouded his brow suddenly lifted.

"Wait a moment, Burbank," he said.

"Wait!" repeated Mr. Burbank. "For what? Bless you, Harry! they have not been kept in ignorance of our plan, and are already prepared."

With some dismay he saw Major Bearsley place Blanche in her mother's arms.

"There is a word of explanation necessary here, Carlton," said the major.

"Explanation! What explanation, pray?"

Mr. Burbank grew suddenly flushed, and then pale at a new thought, suggested by the manner of his friend.

"Do you mean to tell me, sir," he said, with a hauteur wholly foreign to him, "that you repudiate the arrangement—that you—that you *spurn* my daughter?"

"Carlton," said the major, gravely, laying his hand upon his friend's shoulder, "whatever comes of this she shall always be my daughter as well as yours."

"I beg your pardon, if I have wronged you; but I confess myself still mystified."

"Here is Tom Tracy. I think he can set things to rights."

Swanton was here brought forward by some of the Cheyennes. Bonds were unnecessary. He had got his death wound. They laid him down in the moonlight.

"Tom Tracy," said the major, gravely, "at the gate of death your hatred must die. Do you verify, and will you complete, what you told me so many years ago, when you left me, as you supposed, dying?"

"Harry Bearsley," was the defiant reply, "your words show that you don't know me. 'At the gate of death,' as you say, my hatred of you and of him"—pointing to Mr. Burbank—"does not die! I leave a pretty mess of uncertainty! You dare not marry them; and yet, while you refuse, you will never know but that you are denying your own flesh and blood. Every favor you show him may be wronging your own; every favor you deny him may be wronging your own! Hal! hal! hal! I verify nothing—I complete nothing! Are we quits?"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BETROTHAL RATIFIED.

"Hold on, gentlemen," said Shang, now coming forward. "Don't git in a flurry. Jest wait an' see if the Great Shanghai hain't got a card that'll block this chick's leetle game. Don't say a word further till I git back."

And he was gone like a shot.

Everybody looked surprised, Walter no less than the rest. Bantam spoke for his partner:

"Do what Shang says—that's my advice."

"But what can a stranger know about our affairs?" asked Major Bearsley.

"I think we had better wait, though I know nothing of his purposes," said Walter, in his quiet tones of command.

Major Bearsley cast a piercing look at him, and yielded.

While Shang was away, Blanche whispered:

"Mamma, what is all this about? Why does he so hate you and papa and Major Bearsley?"

Mrs. Burbank flushed slightly as she said:

"When we were young, this man—whose real name is Tom Tracy—took a fancy to me, and when I married your father, conceived a deadly hatred to him and, it seems, to me also. His hatred of Major Bearsley springs from the fact that they both had expectations of inheritance from the grandfather of Tracy and the grand-uncle of the major, who, at first favoring his grandson, afterward disinherited him, in favor of his grand-nephew."

To while the time, Major Bearsley told how he had been left for dying by the treacherous Tracy, only recovering to find himself in a sort of honorable captivity, as an adopted member of a tribe of Cheyennes. After having been detained all these years, he was at last released by a young chief whose life he had saved, and given an escort to the border.

It was then Mrs. Burbank's turn to tell how she had been captured by Buffalo Horn, after her husband had placed her *en route* for St. Paul, to meet her daughter and husband. Shang reaped, bearing a burden in his arms which proved to be a woman, so weak as to be unable to walk.

"This," said he, as he laid her on the green sward, "is the why I didn't git back to the rendezvous in time. I run across a little party o' reds that held her a prisoner; an' when I had rescued her, I soon learned that she was a prize woth havin'."

"Margery Baily!" exclaimed Mr. Burbank.

"The devil! That croaker again!" and Hal clenched his hands and set his teeth with hatred and apprehension.

The renegade, with difficulty raised upon his elbow and glared upon her.

"Woman! not a word, or I'll tear your accursed tongue from your throat!" he hissed.

Margery Baily almost fainted with fear. Mr. Burbank took her quivering hands.

"My good woman," he said, "do not be afraid. This man is powerless. What does he not wish you to reveal? Speak freely. I am your friend, and will protect you."

"Margery Baily! Margery Baily!" repeated Major Bearsley, as if his recollection were going back for some half-forgotten name.

"Hal's mother—mother," explained Mr. Burbank.

"Do you know me?" asked the major, bending over her. "I am the father. And now, what about these children?"

"Alack! alack!" wailed the woman, as if in helpless bewilderment.

"Control yourself, madam," said the major, anxiously. "Perhaps you have it in your power to right a great wrong. Did you exchange the children?"

"God forgive me, yes!"

"Then he who has grown up as my son is not such in fact?"

"No. The mother died, and having everything in my own hands, I had no difficulty in substituting one child for the other."

"What became of my child?" the major asked brokenly.

"Tom Tracy took it away."

"And do you know nothing of its after life?"

"He brought it up as his own."

"It cannot be that Sidney Swanton," began Blanche.

"No," said Margery, "the boy fled from his supposed father, and concealed his identity under an assumed name."

"And that name?"

"He has been at your house, sir, in the person of Walter Weston."

Blanche uttered a suppressed cry and sunk almost fainting into her mother's arms.

"Walter Weston!" repeated Mr. Burbank.

"I," said Walter, coming forward mechanically, and gazing from one to the other.

"Is this the man?" asked Mr. Burbank, clutching Walter by the shoulder.

"Yes."

Major Bearsley gazed into the face of the young man a moment, then opened his arms.

"I recognize Martha's boy," he said; "and I see that he is worthy of her. God bless you my son, as he has me in this restoration!"

"Well! it seems that my identity is a little mixed," said Hal, white with suppressed fury. "If this be the rightful Harry Bearsley, Junior, who in the fiend's name am I? Speak you old witch! Who am I?"

Margery Baily looked upon him with helpless woe in her face, and said:

"No less than my own son!"

"Well, then, my gentle mother, I curse you for your kindly offices in attempting to put me into another man's shoes! And who, pray, was the dainty gentleman who shared with such a thing as you the responsibility of my birth?"

"Your father lies yonder. He thought to gain for you the inheritance which, as he believed, ought to have been his, and to gratify his revenge on Mr. and Mrs. Burbank by marrying his son to their daughter."

"Fish! you are scum, both of you, and I repudiate you."

His scathing words fell upon the wretched woman like a blight. With streaming eyes raised to heaven, she murmured:

"God forgive me! It is my due!"

"I have one word to add," said Shang, who had been watching the effect of his "card" with quiet satisfaction. "I happened to overhear a conversation between the renegade's other son, called Sidney, and a young woman known as Mary Edwards, when she lay at the point of death. Hold on, my dear sir! Don't git riled! It seems that our friend here married the girl on the sly, under an assumed name, and then deserted her. When she turned up, so as to be in the way of his proposed marriage with this lady, he got rid of her in a most effective manner, making the Indians shoulder the blame. As Walter an' Bantam here had talked with her an' might have found out his villainy, he tried to silence them, and they both bear the wounds now. This part of the performance I witnessed myself."

"Great heaven! can this be true?" exclaimed Mr. Burbank, appealing to Hal, while Burly Ben stood with mouth agape.

"Let us waive that question for a moment," said Hal, with the coolness of despair. The mask being torn completely away left him reckless. "And I suppose that this gentleman will enter upon the rights from which I have inadvertently to long excluded him. I need not ask whether he will supplant me as a suitor for the hand of Miss Burbank. I see that his high sense of honor has not stood in the way of his already having insinuated himself into the affections of another man's betrothed wife."

Walter flushed hotly; Mr. Burbank was about to protest; but Hal kept on without pause:

"Well, let him take her, with my compliments—and this!"

An instant a pistol-barrel gleamed in the moonlight. Then a flash and a sharp report.

Blanche, made vigilant by her love, comprehended what was coming before any one else. With a scream she precipitated herself upon Walter's breast, throwing her arms about his neck, and both fell to the ground.

Amid fierce ejaculations, there was a sudden rush at Hal; but with a derisive laugh he put the pistol to his own head, and a second bullet placed him beyond the reach of vengeance.

"My God! he has killed them both!" cried Mr. Burbank, while Major Bearsley advanced toward them in speechless agony. Mrs. Burbank had not fainted. She looked as if frozen into a statue of woe.

But their anguish was suddenly and unexpectedly relieved. Walter raised to his feet, still clasping Blanche in his arms.

"We are unharmed," he said. "Her unexpected weight tripped me and saved my life."

Then he bent and whispered in the girl's ear:

"I do not ask you the sweet question in words; but give me one little sign."

It came, in the form of a delicious little hug.

Then the lover looked up again, and with radiant face continued aloud:

"Fathers, both—and you, dear mother—we are ready to ratify the engagement entered into before we were born. Bear witness all, we pledge ourselves to its fulfillment thus!"

Blanche understood him and raised her face wet with happy tears, to his. Their lips met.

THE END.